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Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations

Universalism, Constructivism and Near-Death Experience

GREGORY SHUSHAN

FOREWORD BY **GAVIN FLOOD**

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Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations

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Gregory Shushan

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Dedicated to my mother, for a sense of wonder, curiosity, and lifelong intellectual and creative inspiration beyond words; and to my father, to whom all the mysteries herein have been revealed, for the balancing counterweight of pragmatism and scepticism, and for planting the seeds of confidence and aspiration.

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Foreword

The concern about death and whether there is conscious survival after death has been a central preoccupation of human beings since we first became self-conscious. Different conceptions of an afterlife developed in different civilizations, often linked to ideas about some kind of moral judgement. In this engaging and wide ranging book Gregory Shushan takes us on a fascinating journey through ancient ideas about the afterlife in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Vedic India, Mesoamerica, and pre-Buddhist China. But this is not simply a historical mapping of these early concepts, the author brings them to life and makes them relevant to contemporary concerns about what has become known as near-death-experiences. Part of the argument is that in these experiences people report a range of phenomena that have correlates in different cultures and different histories. Treading carefully through the difficulties of comparative religion, whether it is possible or desirable to offer comparisons, the author carefully examines the evidence from the past, offering a phenomenological account from different texts and different voices. From the phenomenological description we see that several themes emerge or more specifically the same set of thematic elements occurs, namely the idea of an afterlife journey, out of the body experiences, journeys to other non-physical worlds, encounters with deceased relatives, visions of a divine presence, and an experience of judgement about one's earthly life.

In presenting a study such as this, the author is not only giving an account of ancient civilizations but is also performing a comparative religion that takes seriously the challenges of the last thirty years. This is very good cross cross-cultural scholarship that points to the legitimacy of comparative study and the possibilities of comparative study in the future. The book critically engages with postmodernism and presents an argument that comparison is indeed essential to understanding human beings and their worlds. This is a bold and engaging book. The author does not shy away from difficult issues and lays down a challenge to postmodern relativism and the idea that all human experience is a cultural or social construct. There are, the author argues, human experiences – especially the

experience of death – that cut across cultures and religions and that we all share. But these experiences are not simple or unaffected by culture; they are inevitably influenced by the languages we use, our societies, and the world-views we are born into. Reading this book one is left with a sense of the wide range of cultures that the human experiment has produced along with our perennial concern with the question of death and the possibilities of immortality and continuity.

Gavin Flood
June 2008

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I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to those who helped with particular chapters: for Egypt, Dr Stephen Quirke, who gave a particularly thorough reading with detailed comments and insightful observations; for Mesopotamia, Dr Stephanie Dalley, whose helpful and encouraging comments led to some significant improvements; and Dr Martin O’Kane whose support extended to also giving a critical reading of my methodology; for India, Dr Maya Warriar, who made perceptive comments, raised pertinent questions, and pointed out an important additional text; and Professor Stephanie Jamison, whose thought-provoking criticism of my approach alerted me to the need for some re-organization and clarifications; for China, Professor Xinzhong Yao, whose expertise was essential in steering me through much difficult terrain; and Prof. Emeritus Jordan Paper, who also corresponded with me in some depth on cross-cultural comparison and mystical experience; for Mesoamerica, Professor J. G. Brotherston, whose useful comments helped with some key observations and clarifications; Dr Penny Dransart, who enthusiastically shared her wide-ranging knowledge of the civilizations and their religions; Professor Karl Taube, who made some keen observations and provided me with copies of his articles relevant to the subject; and Dr Elisabeth Graham, who engaged in a lively e-mail exchange regarding methodology, terminology, and diffusion, as well as Mesoamerica. Professor Mu-chou Poo made some insightful comments on

comparative methodology which helped lead to a more focused work; and encouraging discussions with Dr Ruth Whitehouse helped me to refine my topic at its earliest stage. Also helpful were discussions with Dr Mark Fox on early and non-Western near-death experiences, Dr Penny Sartori regarding her clinical research into NDEs, Jennifer Smith on the Vedic afterlife, Professor Daniel Foxvog and Peter Westh on the Sumerian afterlife (via ANE-2 discussion list), and Cécilia Robache on universals, mourning, and various other matters.

Finally, the research would not have been undertaken without the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Thanks also to the Centro Incontri Umani, Ascona, Switzerland, for a summer Research Fellowship which enabled me to prepare the manuscript for publication.

Abbreviations of Primary Sources

Note: Renderings of proper nouns have been standardized throughout to the most recent translations or transliterations (e.g. Zhuangzi is used instead of Chuang Tzu, regardless of translator's rendering). Transliterations have been spelled phonetically, and diacritical marks omitted.

1. Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt

CT *Coffin Texts* (Faulkner 1973, 1977, 1978)

Pyr. *Pyramid Texts* (Allen 2005)

2. Mesopotamia to the End of the Old Babylonian Period

BEU *Bilgames, Enkidu and the Underworld* (George 2003b)

DB *The Death of Bilgames* (George 2003b)

Des. 'In the desert by the early grass' (Katz 2003)

DU *Death of Ur-Namma* (Black et al. 2004; *ETCSL* 2.4.1.1)

ETCSL Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (Black et al. 1998–)

In. *Inana's Descent to the Underworld* (Black et al. 2004; *ETCSL* 1.4.1)

LAS *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Black et al. 2004).

NJ *Ningishzida's Journey to the Netherworld* (*ETCSL* t.1.7.3)

OBV Old Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (George 2003a)

SV Standard Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (George 2003a)

3. Vedic India

AV *Atharva Veda* (*AV_A*: Panikkar 1977; *AV_B*: Whitney 1905)

BU *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (Olivelle 1999)

CU *Chandogya Upanishad* (Olivelle 1999)

IU *Isa Upanishad* (Olivelle 1999)

- JB* *Jaiminiya Brahmana* (*JB_A*: Bodewitz 1973; *JB_B*: O’Flaherty 1985)
- KaU* *Katha Upanishad* (Olivelle 1999)
- KsU* *Kausitaki Upanishad* (Olivelle 1999)
- KYV* *Krishna Yajur Veda* (Keith 1914)
- MaiU* *Maitri Upanishad* (Roebuck 2000)
- MuU* *Mundaka Upanishad* (Olivelle 1999)
- PU* *Prashna Upanishad* (Olivelle 1999)
- RV* *Rig Veda* (*RV_A*: O’Flaherty 1981; *RV_B*: Panikkar 1977; *RV_C*: Griffith 1896)
- SB* *Shatapatha Brahmana* (Eggeling 1882–1900)

4. Pre-Buddhist China

- Cci* *Chu ci* (Hawkes 1985)
- Hnz* *Huainanzi* (Morgan 1933)
- Li* *Li ji* (Legge 1885)
- Shj* *Shanhaijing* (Birrell 1999)
- Shi* *Shijing* (Waley 1954)
- Shu* *Shujing* (Legge 1879)
- Zh* *Zhuangzi* (*Zh_A*: Watson 1963; *Zh_B*: Paper 1995)

5. Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica

- AC* *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* (Bierhorst 1992)
- CBC* *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Roys 1933)
- CM* *Cantares Mexicanos* (Bierhorst 1985)
- HINS* *History of the Indies of New Spain* (Durán trans. 1994)
- HNS* *General History of the Things of New Spain* (Sahagun trans. 1973–78)
- LS* *Legend of the Suns* (Bierhorst 1992)
- PM* *Primeros Memoriales* (Sahagun trans. 1997)
- PV* *Popol Vuh* (Tedlock 1996)
- RCY* *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (Landa trans. 1941)

Introduction

This book is an interdisciplinary comparison of conceptions of afterlife experiences in five early civilizations characterized by a high degree of cultural independence (Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt, Sumerian and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia, Vedic India, pre-Buddhist China, and pre-Columbian Mesoamerica); and in historical and contemporary narratives of near-death experiences worldwide, which present such experiences as factual. The near-death experience (NDE) typically occurs during a period of clinical death or near-death, after which an individual, upon resuscitation, reports having had mystical or spiritual episodes. Phenomenologically similar experiences in the shamanic practices of small-scale societies¹ will also be considered to a limited extent.

The purpose of this study is fourfold:

1. To demonstrate methodically that there exists a series of cross-cultural, cross-temporal, and cross-contextual similarities apparently too consistent and specific for 'coincidence' to be an adequate explanation, thereby establishing that afterlife conceptions are not entirely culturally-determined and that they appear to be universal or quasi-universal to some degree;
2. To attempt to explain the nature of the universal element(s);
3. To explore the relationships and interactions between the (quasi-)universal elements and the culture-specific elements, particularly in determining the extent to which culture influences the NDE and related experiential phenomena, and vice versa;
4. To reassess the currently predominant critical stance on comparative studies of religions, and to demonstrate that such comparisons can be both productive and methodologically/theoretically sound.

The justification for comparing ancient religious beliefs with historical and modern experience is to test the third issue: the theory that such phenomena have occurred throughout human history and would have

contributed to the formation of belief systems and been drawn upon in the creation of religious texts. Considering the limited uses to which writing was put in these civilizations, and that only a small fraction of texts ever survives in the archaeological/historical record, it is not surprising that explicitly personal accounts of such phenomena are rare. While the descriptions in the ancient religious texts under consideration here are not overtly portrayed as accounts of personal experiences, there is no reason to assume they did not incorporate such material.

While it may seem impracticable to compare the beliefs of multiple civilizations as well as related experience, the limitation to only a single narrow area of belief makes it workable. The aim is not to compare ‘religion’ or ‘myth’ or ‘religious/spiritual experience’ in general, nor even ‘afterlife beliefs’ *per se*, for notions of spirits continuing existence on earth (i.e. ghosts), reincarnation, and funerary beliefs and rituals are excluded (except where particularly relevant). The focus here is rather on a single aspect of afterlife beliefs: conceptions relating to the experiences of the disembodied consciousness of an individual following his or her physical death, including journeys to other realms (heavens, hells, and intermediate states), encounters with other beings (ferryman, judges, divinities, demons, ancestors),² undergoing perils and judgement, and ultimate fates (paradise, punishment, annihilation, rebirth, apotheosis, divinization³).

The descriptions of afterlife experiences under discussion occur in sources that held religious meaning within their respective traditions. The specific nature and purpose of each source is noted at the beginning of each section. The comparison is not within or between genres, but between the content of relevant sources regardless of genre. The fundamental differences between the types of texts (as well as between the religions *per se*) also work to our advantage in determining universalism, adding a cross-contextual dimension which makes the similarities all the more significant. Neither the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, nor Mesoamericans left behind anything like the relatively cohesive statements of religious philosophy of the *Upanishads* or the Confucian Classics, while the only systematic ‘practical’ guide to the afterlife is the Egyptian *Book of Two Ways*. Only India and China produced texts concerned mainly with life in the earthly realm which nevertheless contain relevant passages; and ethnographic material exists only for Mesoamerica.

While there is some relevant representational evidence (on Egyptian coffins, Mesopotamian cylinder seals, Han Chinese funerary paintings, and Mesoamerican ceramics and codices), it will be referred to here only when it seems particularly helpful in elucidating the meaning of a concept. Interpretations of such images are often speculative, though they are almost invariably consistent with the texts (not least because they rely upon them). There is, in any case, nothing apparent in the representations to contradict the arguments here.

The dates of composition of most of the texts are largely obscure, and are often believed to be far earlier than the earliest extant examples (i.e. having originated as oral literature). Any discussion of conceptual 'development' is thus, to some extent, based upon uncertain chronology. Furthermore, it is likely that relevant earlier or contemporary texts which might have supplemented or contradicted our current understanding of the surviving material existed, but have been lost.

With the exception of some of the Chinese and Mesoamerican poetry and songs, and some of the Mesoamerican ethnographic material, in all our civilizations the texts were written and read by the elite. The extent to which they represent the beliefs of the general populace is unknown. A frequent cause for concern in comparative studies is the validity of accepting as a confirmed 'similarity' an occasional (or even single) occurrence of a motif or concept in one civilization, in comparison with its common occurrence in another (Köbber 1973: 190). One example is the rare Vedic heavenly boat in contrast to the ubiquitous Egyptian sun-barque. While such instances will be noted, this study is not concerned with how widespread a conception was, but with whether it existed at all. The cross-cultural recurrence of a theme or concept requires explanation regardless of who or how many subscribed to it. The present study does not seek to generalize that all people believed the same things or conceptualized them in the same ways, even within a given tradition. The intention is thus not to present a single coherent view of *the* afterlife conceptions of each civilization, but rather to review the existing evidence and whatever apparent diversities, contradictions, inconsistencies, variations, and changes over time it might reveal. A more synthetic, less chronological approach might risk an over-generalizing misrepresentation of the data as being more cohesive than in actual fact. Adhering to a *strict* chronological discussion, however, would frequently require dividing

types of texts or even single works between different sections, potentially confusing different schools of thought (as well as making for an unnecessarily less coherent presentation). Discussion is therefore organized *broadly* chronologically, though in some cases organized thematically (particularly when dating is obscure) and/or grouped by tradition (e.g. Confucianism and Daoism). Considering that conceptions remained remarkably thematically consistent throughout the span of each type of evidence, this is not a serious concern here.

It should also be noted that most ancient languages remain imperfectly understood to varying degrees, so that meanings are sometimes obscure. Problems of meaning can also arise from our incomplete knowledge of culturally-embedded uses of symbolism and metaphor. With most of the texts discussed in this book, it can be difficult to ascertain what is a metaphor and what is intended to be read as literal. For example, in the *Pyramid Texts* (N249), it is stated that: ‘Nut’s belly has been impregnated with the seed of the *akh* who is in her’. The *akh* is formed by the reunion of two elements of the soul in the afterlife – the *ka* (animating life force), and the *ba* (the unique self, or personality). Nut is the sky-goddess and mother of the deceased, of Re (sun-god and creator), and of Osiris (lord of the dead, fertility, and regeneration) – all of whom are associated with each other. Nut’s womb is the Duat (netherworld), giving birth daily to Re/deceased; though the sarcophagus was also seen as Nut’s womb. Does the passage thus reflect a conceptual metaphor for the ritual of placing the mummy in the sarcophagus; or is the ritual an enactment of what was believed to happen to the *akh*? Or are both text and ritual metaphorical for a more generalized concept of entering an afterlife realm prior to spiritual rebirth?

Another issue is that we are dealing with texts concerned with themes that are by their very nature intangible, abstract, even ineffable. W. B. Kristensen (1949: 20) suggested that the apparent lack of coherence of such texts might reflect the inexpressibility of the mysteries of death and rebirth, and found it a ‘waste of energy’ to try to make orderly sense of them. While acknowledging the first point, this study *does* attempt to make sense of the texts which, after all, presumably made at least some sense to the individuals who deliberately created them, and within their societies. The content, meaning, and sometimes presentation of many of these works would not have remained consistent for hundreds or even

thousands of years if they were random and confused within their cultural contexts. Still, we must reluctantly admit that a thorough understanding of the beliefs of people in past societies is not possible. As Bottéro wrote (1992: 270, on the Mesopotamian afterlife), we can only attempt to piece together bits of evidence from disparate sources ‘in order to reconstruct a picture that is very likely to reflect only very badly, even mistakenly here and there, the original view on the matter’.

Directly examining the original sources rather than using secondary syntheses has, however, allowed me to look at the material afresh and in detail. Relying on what others select as being important, or neglect as unimportant, limits the potential for new interpretations and insights. This has been vital in avoiding oft-repeated past over-generalizations; and has most significantly resulted in a reassessment of the Mesopotamian afterlife, which scholarly preconceptions tell us was strictly pessimistic and lacking judgement.

It is neither possible nor necessary to consider each and every of the entities, locales, and objects referred to in the texts. Some deities and places have multiple designations or epithets, and it is sometimes unclear when a new one is being introduced or a familiar one being described further. To avoid undue repetition, only the earlier version of a passage, theme, or motif will generally be referred to.

Following this Introduction, [Chapter 1](#) details the methodological and theoretical approaches taken, with particular emphasis on addressing postmodern criticisms of cross-cultural comparisons. A chapter on early civilizations ([Chapter 2](#)) then explains the methodological criteria for the selection of civilizations considered; and discusses the limitations of diffusionist theories for the present study. A chapter on the NDE ([Chapter 3](#)) focuses on its phenomenology and significance of occurrence cross-culturally. The next five chapters in Part II discuss the afterlife conceptions in the texts of each respective civilization. They are primarily descriptive, with discussion and analysis limited to elucidating the meanings of the texts within their cultural contexts, and understanding conceptual continuity and change over time. They are followed by a chapter exploring the similarities and differences between the traditions, and between them and the NDE ([Chapter 9](#)). The aim here is to organize and categorize the data to facilitate further discussion in the remainder of the book, which examines the potential significance of the results of the

comparison. While an ‘experiential theory’ (i.e. that afterlife beliefs are influenced by NDE or something similar) is implied by this analysis ([Chapter 10](#)), the strengths and weaknesses of alternative theories are reviewed ([Chapter 11](#)). A ‘theoretical eclecticism’ involving a symbiotic relationship between culture, experience, and belief is ultimately argued ([Chapter 12](#)).

Part One

Theory and Methodology in Concept and Application

Chapter 1

Comparison, Universalism, and the Rehabilitation of the Comparative ‘Similar’

In recent decades, there has arguably been more mental exertion spent on flogging the not-quite-dead horse of ‘comparative religion’ than on actually comparing religions. Comparative studies have become so academically unfashionable that they ‘have virtually disappeared in graduate programs in favor of increasingly narrow “area studies” research into specific religious texts and communities’ (Patton and Ray 2000: 3). This is largely due to a postmodern backlash against the romantic universalism of Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade et al.; and in some ways is an understandable reaction to flawed methodologies which tended to ignore social and historical contexts in the search for ‘grand, unified theories’. Comparative studies are regarded with such suspicion that when one does take the academically hazardous step of comparing religions, extreme caution must be taken to avoid charges of naïveté and universalizing.

However valid for specific studies, such criticisms of comparison *per se* are cognitively dissonant in their conflation of three issues: We should not (1) *compare* because comparative scholars (2) *look for similarities* in order to (3) bolster a *universalist agenda*. The disentanglement of these issues will go some way to explicating the methodology of the present study.

First, no matter how many comparativists have argued for a universalist interpretation of their comparisons, ‘comparison’ does not mean the same thing as ‘looking for universals’. It was not the use of a comparative method itself which determined their conclusions, but their theoretical frameworks, scholarly and personal perspectives, interpretations, and undoubtedly (sometimes) agendas. Some may have deliberately been looking for universals, while others may have reached universalist conclusions based on observations of similarities. Comparison itself does not determine what researchers discover or what they do with their

discoveries, as Robert Segal (2001: 348) has well explained. ‘The method dictates no one explanation and is compatible with any’ (ibid. 373).

Likewise, comparison is often criticized for being evolutionist, though as Segal (ibid. 347) has also pointed out, comparison does not ‘rank’ what it finds – ranking is interpretation, and interpretation is researcher-specific. Adding to the quagmire of generalizations, Jonathan Z. Smith (2000: 237) has characterized comparison as assuming ‘some theory of influence, diffusion, borrowing, or the like’. Leaving aside for the moment the fact that the present comparison is predicated on relative lack of historical connection, comparison cannot simultaneously assume universalism, evolutionism, and diffusionism because these are largely competing arguments (with potentially competing agendas, e.g. inclusivism, exclusivism, and reductionism, respectively). The issue here is not only a priori universalist/evolutionist/diffusionist comparisons; it is also the a priori assumption that comparison itself is by definition synonymous with any of these orientations – that it is somehow epiphenomenal to an *-ism*.

There are certainly valid critiques of how and why we compare, and how we conceptualize comparison. However, just as *not* making comparisons is a method rather than a theory, so is *making* comparisons (notwithstanding the fact that method needs to be justified in theoretical terms).

Second, postmodernism has explicitly favoured *difference*. The act of focusing on cross-cultural similarities is considered politically dubious, for it allegedly does an ‘injustice to the uniqueness of the individual case ... violating the integrity of culture’ (Köbber 1973: 190). As Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray (2000: 2) have summarized,

... to compare is to abstract, and abstraction is construed as a political act aimed at domination and annihilation; cross-cultural comparison becomes intrinsically imperialistic, obliterating the cultural matrix from which it ‘lifts’ the compared object. Thus, to compare religious traditions, *particularly historically unrelated ones*,¹ or elements and phenomena within those traditions, is to attempt to control and ultimately destroy them.

I hope that in the present case it is obvious that I am not seeking imperial domination of five ancient civilizations, two of which are wholly extinct;² or ideologically supporting such an agenda (assuming such a thing exists). I also hope that despite my facetiousness here, my point demonstrates that ‘imperialism’ is yet another *-ism* which cannot define comparison. Furthermore, Wendy Doniger (1996: 109) points out that stressing differences can also be politically damaging in creating or reinforcing divisive categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’. The potential consequences – religious intolerance and racism – are far more serious than the collective post-Saïd guilt of Western academia. The original intent of focussing on similarities in comparative studies was, after all, to *understand* other traditions, partly through identification with one’s own. It is not an ‘injustice’ to observe that different religions share similar concepts and themes; the observation can, in fact, be seen as *validation* of each culture’s beliefs (H. Smith 2000b: 177, 180). As Ninian Smart (1996: 6) pointed out, while every culture is unique, ‘it does not follow that we have no common feelings or perspectives’.

It is true that postmodernism has been more reflexively transparent with its agendas than universalizing theologian/metaphysician-comparativists, for example; though its arguments are no less ideologically motivated, and therefore no less biased. Postmodernism cannot escape its own clutches: it is every bit as culturally embedded as the most theologically minded universalism. However, to ignore similarities because of political or theoretical orientation is neglectful scholarship and bad science. Similarities and differences must both be taken into account in a comparative study, for examining half the data can only result in half an explanation. As William Paden (1988: 162) stated, ‘True comparative sensibility is held captive neither by particulars nor universals’.

Doniger (1996: 109) also writes that similarities are mainly valuable as ‘a useful base from which to proceed to ask questions about the differences’, though she does not clearly explain why the reverse cannot be the case. Just as ‘comparison’ is not synonymous with any theoretical orientation, ‘looking at similarities’ is not synonymous with ‘ignoring differences’. Perhaps one of the reasons comparative studies have so often focused on similarities is that the dissimilarities are both expected and incalculably vast. It is unsurprising to find that Egyptian Osiris does not judge the Vedic dead, or that Sumerian Inana does not descend to the

Chinese Yellow Springs to play football with the decapitated head of Maya underworld hero-twin Xblanque. Uniqueness is not denied, but taken for granted. It is normative ‘difference’ which reveals the similarities, while the concept of ‘different’ is only comprehensible by reference to the concept of ‘similar’. Each defines the other, providing us with categories which enable us to organize and interpret our data (Segal 2001: 373).

It is, in fact, the vastness of the differences that makes the similarities so significant, and inherently demanding of an explanation. Precisely for this reason, differences can be ‘a useful base from which to proceed to ask questions about’ similarities. If there is a greater emphasis on similarities here, it is due not to ‘ideological defensiveness’ (Paden 1988: 162), but to the fact that their existence cannot be explained *solely* by reference to a given culture’s own belief context. This reveals the problem with Eva Hunt’s (1977: 37–8) contention that because myths are ‘culture-bound’, they cannot be usefully compared unless they are solely from historically related cultures. On the contrary, it is precisely *because* they are ‘culture-bound’ that makes comparisons between (largely) *unrelated* cultures significant. Bruce Trigger (1993: 16; cf. Kluckhorn 1953: 101) noted that similarities across cultures are usually self-evident, broad, and general; for example, the concept of divine kingship, incest taboos, and belief in life after death. If more specific and consistent similarities are found, as in the present study, they are therefore of particular significance and require explanation. This is clear when we consider the following points (the first two of which will be demonstrated in this book):

1. They occur in *sets* of motifs or elements with remarkable consistency across largely unconnected cultures around the world and of different eras; and on a more specific level than general categories such as ‘belief in life after death’.
2. This same set is thematically consistent with the most frequently recurring core elements of the NDE.
3. Comparisons of other mythic forms, e.g. creation myths, do not yield the same types of consistent cross-cultural similarities.³

Moreover, creation myths do not have a claimed experiential counterpart with which they can be compared. Obviously the cross-cultural recurrence of a theme, belief, or idea does not mean it is ‘true’.

After all, ‘A large part of the human race at one time believed that mankind is descended from melon seeds’ (Waley 1954: 246). However, cross-culturally and cross-temporally people do not report experiences associated with this belief, and it is difficult to imagine how it could be potentially indicative of an identifiable type of direct experience. It is the parallels with ancient, medieval, and modern experience that make the similarities between the texts especially important for the present study.

J. Z. Smith (2000: 237) writes that ‘similarity and contiguity have proved incapable of generating interesting theory’. This statement is problematic on at least two levels. The first is that ‘interesting’ is a wholly subjective term. Even if the theories of a Frazer, Jung, Lévi-Strauss, or Eliade are outmoded, one cannot fault them simply on grounds of being uninteresting. The second is that Smith’s usage of ‘theory’ does not appear to refer to a ‘practical’ model intended to address a given problem in the study of religions (as the term is understood in the present study); but rather to abstract Theory (with a capital ‘T’), for its own sake. While ‘similarity’ may not facilitate the kind of scholarship which personally interests Smith, this is not a compelling reason for ignoring it.

Even more problematic is Smith’s (1982: 22) contention that the act of drawing a cross-cultural parallel is a ‘subjective experience’ which ‘is more impressionistic than methodical’, and is ‘not science, but magic’. Patton and Ray (2000: 4) concur, seeing comparison more as a creative, artistic endeavour than a scientific one. As with any intellectual undertaking (including studies which do not make comparisons, or critique those that do), the comparison of religions relies upon an imperfect individual’s ‘intuition’, and is limited by his or her skills, knowledge, insight, and methodology (Smith 1982: 23). It cannot be exact empirical science, though this does not mean it is therefore solipsistic by definition (yet another *-ism* with which comparison is not synonymous). Without intellectual creativity in the observation, analysis, and interpretation of data, we would have only description (which, as Smith rightly argues, is in itself interpretative and reliant on observation). This does not indicate, however, that cross-cultural parallels exist only in the mind of the scholar (cf. Doniger 1998: 76; H. Smith 2000b: 179–80) any more than it follows that objective differences do.

Interpretations and observations may vary between scholars, but objective similarities can be discerned cross-culturally as clearly as the

Emperor's nakedness. If people are illustrated in representations produced within five different civilizations, one would not likely argue that the identification of the subjects in the pictures as 'humans' is entirely a subjective construct. The identifiability of the image is irrespective of culture-specific words for 'person', beliefs about people, or relationships between humans and their cultural, historical or environmental contexts. Arguing that references to light in texts relating to the afterlife from five different civilizations are subjective constructs would be an equally nonsensical denial of the apparent. Certainly my knowledge of one text (or of the NDE) enables me to identify parallel elements in another, just as my knowledge of the appearance of humans enables me to recognize images of them regardless of (most) tradition-specific artistic styles. It does not follow that the parallels exist only because I identified them. They exist equally if I deliberately seek them out, casually recognize them, or am entirely ignorant of them. No matter how long or how intently I search through all the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Vedic, and Chinese texts for a reference to receiving divine wisdom in the netherworld by being spat upon by a human head transformed into a melon (as in *PV*) I will never find it. I cannot 'observe' such a similarity into existence, any more than I can deny away the existence of the references to light. Just as with differences, the existence of similarities is not dependent upon observation (Schrödinger's Cat notwithstanding). The objective existence of one is no more problematic or controversial than that of the other. The degree to which one should impose this denial of objective similarity is also unclear. Does one draw the line at comparing Dionysus and Bacchus, Dionysus and Jesus, or Dionysus and Krishna?

In short, neither the desire for, the usefulness of, nor the logic behind a methodological or theoretical primacy of difference over similarity has been at all convincingly demonstrated. As Lévi-Strauss (trans. 1963: 248) wrote over half a century ago,⁴ comparative studies

... have been jeopardised ... by intellectual pharisees who prefer to deny obvious relationships because science does not yet provide an adequate method for their interpretation. The rejection of facts because they appear to be unintelligible is surely more sterile from the viewpoint of scientific progress than the formulation of hypotheses.

The present study seeks to rehabilitate (if not resuscitate) the comparative ‘similar’; to liberate it from a priori associations with dubious theories and methodologies, and from charges of political incorrectness and nonexistence.

Third, so controversial is the notion of ‘universal’ that the once-lauded work of Eliade is now widely considered to be ‘*irredeemable*’⁵ because of its view that there is a ‘universal, transcendent “sacred” refracted in the ritual and mythic behaviour of a cross-cultural human archetype called *Homo religiosus*’ (Patton and Ray 2000: 1–2). To even suggest that a ‘spiritual quest’ is common to virtually all peoples requires numerous and repeated qualifiers (e.g. Torrance 1994: xiii); and indeed the very term ‘religion’ is under attack on the grounds that it is intrinsically universalizing (and thus theologizing) in assuming a common idea of ‘the sacred’ or ‘transcendent’ (e.g. Fitzgerald 2000).

Here again we have a conflation of two different issues: universalism as a concept or a theoretically neutral observation; and universalism as an inclusivist metaphysical theory. Universalism is no more synonymous with a particular theory than are comparison and the identification of similarities (except, of course, the theory that universals exist). Jeppe Jensen (2001: 238) has pointed out that universals are commonly accepted in the very notion of ‘religious studies’, for if what we termed ‘religions’ had nothing in common there would be nothing to study let alone actively compare. This does not imply any particular explanation, but merely acknowledges that ‘Despite all surface irregularity, social and cultural phenomena exhibit some regularities and other “metaphysical”⁶ properties that render them worthy of being assigned the designation “universal”’ (ibid. 246). Furthermore, many scholars of religions orientated towards anthropology, sociology, psychology, and other social sciences also acknowledge and engage with universals, though attempt to explain them in naturalistic terms. In fact, the entire *raison d’être* of the fields of neurotheology and the cognitive science of religion is to explain ostensible universals of religious belief and behaviour, demonstrating widespread cross-disciplinary acceptance of their existence. Arguments that comparison in general and claims of universality in particular are necessarily theologizing exercises are thus without merit.

Luther Martin (2000a: 53–4) writes that ‘Although the scientific comparison of religions has made remarkable progress since its nineteenth-century origins, metaphysical (i.e. theological) concerns ... continue to *infect*⁷ generalizations about religion.’ He argues that the solution is a ‘new comparativism’ which disregards such theories and instead advocates the a priori adoption of ‘naturalistic’ ones. The first problem here is that Martin’s use of ‘theological’ as a synonym for ‘metaphysical’ is both inaccurate and misleading (and presumably deliberately provocative). A metaphysical explanation⁸ does not require an associated theological system for its formulation and expression, and can in fact be independent of one. A theological explanation, however, indicates requisite *faith* in such a system, and would conform to the preconceived framework of that faith.

The second problem is that Martin is proposing one type of assumption over another without explicit reasoning. Similarly, arguments which appear designed to reinforce structuralist/functionalist preconceptions are also common in comparative studies. Ugo Bianchi (1985: 63), for example, wrote that comparison is of value primarily as an analogical tool to understand ‘partially comparable historical processes’. Despite their advocacy of a comparative approach ‘not from the level of the universal, not from the level of the piecemeal, but somewhere in between’, all the contributions to Laurie Patton and Wendy Doniger’s (1996: 11) anthology which deal with cross-cultural comparisons of myth are social-constructivist in their almost total reliance on political and psychological interpretations. It is here that the present study parts company with most of the otherwise admirable attempts to re-envision and re-invigorate comparative studies of myth and religion.⁹ It does not follow the anthropological assumption that any cross-cultural similarities that cannot be explained by diffusion must be explained in social constructivist terms. Conceptions of the survival of consciousness following the death of the physical body (and reports of analogous experience) is unavoidably a metaphysical issue. To deny this is to wholly remove the subject from its cultural and religious context, and to transplant it in ‘our’ own, purportedly superior and more enlightened scientific one. To automatically assume reductionist explanations of any kind for another culture’s beliefs (or individual’s experience) is not only overtly academically biased in its allegiance to a particular culturally-situated paradigm, but is also an

ethnocentric dismissal of the meanings and values that cultures and individuals place in their own beliefs/experiences (cf. H. Smith 2000b: 179–80). Such preconceptions and analytical restrictions leave no room for the development of competing theories, and no framework for even attempting unbiased comparative study. This categorically does not indicate that I am seeking a grand universalizing theory or pushing a theological (or metaphysical) agenda. It simply means that I do not embark upon my enquiry with my conclusions predetermined (or dictated by what happens to be academically *de rigueur* at this particular moment in intellectual history). Instead, I am seeking a compelling explanation for the cross-cultural recurrence of one particular aspect of religious belief (and correlate experience) – whatever such an explanation might be. The approach neither gives theoretical preference to metaphysical or cognitive or social constructivist interpretations, nor does it a priori disregard any of these as ‘infectious’.¹⁰

Nor does my respect for context follow the extreme cultural pluralism espoused in Jordan Paper’s (2004: 10) cross-cultural study of mystic experience – of considering no explanation ‘more valid than any other’ based on the fact that ‘no culture will be considered superior to any other’. Validity is not contingent upon assigning levels of superiority/inferiority to the culture in which a theory originates. That is, cultural equality does not automatically mean equality of explanation. If the theory of common descent of humans from other mammals carries greater explanatory force than that from melon seeds, this is not a claim of cultural superiority.

Perhaps the most important lesson postmodernism has taught us is the impossibility of an entirely neutral and value-free scholarship. Pure objectivity is an impossibility, and one’s perspective is limited by his/her cultural/historical context. Notwithstanding, we can still conduct our research in a way which *attempts* to be as unbiased *as possible* – particularly those of us who hold no personal religious convictions or allegiances. Anticipating suspicions that I may be a crypto-theologian, I should clarify that I am a confirmed agnostic, presuming neither to believe nor to disbelieve in that which is not known. This informs my research with a general opposition to the logical fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantiam* (constructing arguments based on ignorance, i.e. that something is *true* [or *false*] because the opposite has not been conclusively proven), perhaps heightened by a stress on the importance of ‘evidence’ in

my archaeological training. Of course, agnosticism in itself is a ‘stance’, and one consistent with my personal cultural ‘baggage’: a quietly theologically-unconcerned secular-Jewish father, and a vehemently ex-Catholic mother vacillating between atheism and pantheism, intent upon instilling in her children a relativistic respect for all forms of worship and belief. However, the theoretical/methodological convictions relating to cross-cultural comparison as outlined here do not easily facilitate pushing a particular agenda or forcing a particular conclusion. Of course my knowledge of the NDE means that I cannot read texts relating to the afterlife without such experiences in mind (and if I did there would be no book); and my readings of one text cannot help being informed by my readings of others. This is not necessarily a negative thing, however, and in fact is a useful methodology in itself, outlined by Arvind Sharma (2005) as ‘reciprocal illumination’ (cf. ethnographic analogy in archaeology).

Comparison has also been criticized for ignoring the context of the material being compared – its situation within a culture’s wider belief system and society (Smith 1982: 23). In Smartian terms, we are *most* concerned here with the interface between the ‘doctrinal and philosophical’, the ‘mythic or narrative’, and the ‘experiential’ dimensions of religion (Smart 1996: 7) – though this does not entail a total blindness to the potential relevance of the other dimensions.¹¹ One does not need a thorough understanding of Shang social, historical, and religious beliefs (which no living individual has), for example, to use the inscriptions on oracle bones describing the realm of the ancestors as comparative data; nor to state that they bear certain similarities to texts of other civilizations. Furthermore, Segal (2001: 351–2) points out that ‘proper comparisons not only do not but cannot take phenomena out of their contexts’ because context itself ‘is indispensable for determining the existence’ of the ‘phenomenon’ in each case. It is less an issue of context than one of ‘selectiveness’, for if we are comparing afterlife conceptions in early civilizations, other aspects of those civilizations are largely irrelevant. Segal adds that ‘The difference between the selectiveness of a generalist and that of a particularist is only one of degree. The broader the scale of a comparison, the more selective the elements compared will be....’

J. Z. Smith (2000: 239) has allowed for the possibility of responsible comparison if undertaken with an accounting of each given example’s

‘social, historical, and cultural environments that invest it with its local significance’, as well as of how one’s own scholarly context may affect his or her approach and interpretations. Depending on how thorough Smith believes such a ‘double contextualization’ must be, this is in full agreement with the approach taken here. A truly comprehensive discussion of each concept/theme/motif/symbol in relation to each culture as a whole, however, is not possible here (or debatably in any single work); and would in any case be largely irrelevant to the central research question which concerns the cross-cultural *comparison* of a *particular element* of belief/experience. Furthermore, it would be pointlessly repetitive of the ‘area studies’ work of other scholars which enables the comparison in the first place: comparison does not need to be justified through the reinvention of the wheel. The extent of the focus on particularized studies in recent decades has, in fact, enabled greater academic rigour in comparative studies. As Doniger (1998: 154) remarked, this ‘frees the comparatist to do something else, to draw upon their work to ground new comparisons’.

These arguments also apply to the use of translations. It is not only unfeasible to master seven ancient philologies in order to consider the texts in their original languages,¹² but for the present purposes it is also unnecessary. Translations, after all, are made for a reason, and scholarly translations exist for most of the primary sources under discussion.¹³ It is admittedly not ideal to rely upon them, though there is no reason to assume that peer-reviewed translations by respected scholars who devote their academic lives to one particular philology are worthlessly inaccurate. Nevertheless, where possible, I have also compared different translations of the same text (noting conflicting meanings where relevant); and have drawn upon contextual interpretations in secondary sources to further assist my understanding. I must invoke here the allegedly ‘irredeemable’ Eliade (1959: 91), who argued that it is the comparativist’s job

... to inform himself of the progress made by the specialists in each [relevant area].... The mastery of his own specialty has amply taught him how to orient himself in the labyrinth of facts, where to go for the most important sources, the most appropriate translations, and such studies as are likely to guide his research.... He endeavours to understand the materials that philologists and historians make available to him in his own perspective.

Like comparison, phenomenology has also been criticized for being acontextual and universalizing/theologizing. While the present study embarks with a phenomenological *method*, it does not subscribe to all the *theory* normally associated with ‘Phenomenology’. It does not, for example, follow Van den Leeuw’s (1933: 685) dictum that phenomenology ‘knows nothing of any “historical” development of religion, still less of an “origin” of religion’. The origin(s) of one aspect of religious thought is indeed central to the discussion; and the relationships between historical developments and changes in conceptions over time are taken into account as much as is practicable and relevant. This study is also not phenomenological in the sense that it is concerned with whether ‘religious structures ... have a referent in some outside reality or not’ (e.g. NDEs); and it *does* concern itself to some extent with ‘the question of metaphysical interpretation’ (Paden 1988: 41) if/when the comparative data lead in that direction.

The approach is phenomenological in that it attempts to allow the texts to construct their own meaning as far as possible. Van den Leeuw (1933: 688) stated that phenomenology must ‘confront chaotic “reality”, and all its still uninterpreted signs, and ultimately to testify to what it has understood’. Its goal is to ‘endeavour to observe what appears while adopting the attitude of intellectual suspense’, then to attempt to ‘clarify and ... comprehend’ what has been observed. While speculations regarding subconscious or subtextual meanings will thus be kept to a minimum, the method also entails an attempt at an empathetic understanding from the point of view of the believers, and an attempt at a suspension of one’s own beliefs (or disbeliefs). It further seeks to avoid the imposition of potentially culturally alien concepts (such as a dualistic heaven-or-hell afterlife). No single civilization is seen as the ‘norm’ to which others are measured – they are all being compared equally to each other (Smart 1996: 2, 4).¹⁴

Phenomenological comparison was characterized as an ‘empirical’ approach by S. G. F. Brandon (1962: 4) who saw it as the most likely method of understanding religious phenomena cross-culturally: ‘we may be fairly confident that whatever significant similarities and contrasts may exist will automatically make themselves apparent and perhaps suggest their own explanation’.¹⁵ It is with a greater degree of caution that the

approach is adopted here, for Brandon was writing before the requisite postmodern reflexivity. While acknowledging that the method is also an exercise in interpretation to some extent (particularly when dealing with imperfectly understood ancient texts), it is at least an *attempt* at unbiased empiricism. It is also the clearest way to avoid misrepresentation and selective use of evidence, for if carried out responsibly it makes both similarities *and* differences apparent; and indeed is essential in discerning the very existence of a concept or motif.

Van den Leeuw (1933: 685) also recognized the importance, and indeed necessity, of interdisciplinary approaches in a field dependent upon 'psychology, philosophy, science, comparison, and especially history'. Eliade (1959: 89) argued that it is 'timidity' which has led to the widespread dominance of anthropological and sociological paradigms in the historical study of religions. The role of the 'historian of religions' should rather be to 'master and integrate the results of the researches made in all the important areas of his discipline', for example, through comparative analysis, and familiarity with multiple traditions and with analytical tools from multiple disciplines.

John Bowker (1991: 28) has criticized the phenomenological approach on the grounds that the diversity of beliefs cross-culturally means that 'virtually everything that *can* be imagined about death *has* been imagined. This means that *any* theory ... can most certainly be illustrated and exemplified somewhere in the world's religions'. While this may be the case, the intention here is not to scour 'the world's religions' for particular parallels to illustrate a particular theory. We are instead (a) considering a carefully chosen¹⁶ limited sample of religions; and (b) refraining from subscribing to any particular explanatory theory prior to making the comparison (i.e. using inductive rather than deductive reasoning). Doniger (1998: 153) has argued that theoretical 'Eclecticism is essential to the comparatist's methodology'. Using this 'open-ended' approach means that 'one needs to employ more judgement in applying various theories than in applying one, since constant re-evaluation is necessary if one is constantly making choices' (O'Flaherty 1980: 4). It is the most logical and scientific way of considering such a wide variety of data; and it addresses Patton and Doniger's (1996: 3–4) lament that the choice of methodological approaches in comparative studies is generally between 'reductive contextualization and acontextual mystification'. The goal is to 'make use

of as many sources of understanding as possible' (O'Flaherty 1980: 5) rather than to blindly follow a single theory regardless of its ability to explain the data. Risking an openness to metaphysical theories and an occasional alliance with Eliade are good illustrations of my intent to draw upon the most useful elements of various theories and methods to form an (ideally) integrated and comprehensive whole. The idea is not to be deliberately provocative, but to attempt to rescue various babies from various bathwaters.

To clarify and summarize, the methodology adopted here is not to start with a theory and try to make the data conform to it, but to first examine the phenomenology of afterlife conceptions in each civilization; second to compare them methodically; and third to evaluate the abilities of various theories to explain the results of the comparison. In other words, it is an attempt to allow the theory to emerge from the data. As well as being in agreement with J. Z. Smith about the importance of context, I also agree that 'the "end" of comparison cannot be the act of comparison itself' (Smith 2000: 239). Ideal comparison is not merely observation and description; it is also analysis and explanation. Arguing, for example, that mystical experiences occur cross-culturally and that reductionist attempts to explain them are largely inadequate (Paper 2004) is in itself unproblematic; though refraining from attempting an alternative explanation is ultimately unsatisfying. I do not, however, support Smith's apparent placing of limitations upon the applications of comparison.¹⁷

I concur again with Segal (2001: 339) that many criticisms of the comparative method are 'mischaracterizations either of the method or of the quest for knowledge itself'. Comparison and the observation of similarities are methods of enquiry, not theories or conclusions. Neither comparison itself nor the observation or interpretation of similarities (or differences) are dependent upon any particular theoretical *-ism*. The existence of similarities does not dictate what conclusions will be drawn from them.

Neither the phenomenological nor the comparative methods (as opposed to 'phenomenology' and 'comparative religion' as theoretical/theological *stances*) are mutually incompatible with agnosticism (theoretical and metaphysical), theoretical eclecticism, and reflexivity. A theoretical eclecticism which is open-ended (and open-minded) enough to consider metaphysical theories does not indicate that the comparison is defined by

a universalist agenda in which the researcher discovers unity in world religions because he or she is looking for them out of humanistic or theological motives (see Martin 2000b: 279).

As for the contention that comparative research is routinely unsystematic, and lacking explicit comparison, analysis, and explanation (Smith 1982: 23), again this is not the fault of comparison itself. It is hoped that the present study will demonstrate that it need not always be the case, and that 'breadth need not imply lack of depth' (O'Flaherty 1980: 4).

Many criticisms of cross-cultural comparisons are indeed valid, though the resultant re-orientations have often been over-corrective. While Smart (1996: 6) acknowledged these problems, he argued that they do not negate the value of comparative studies. Without comparison there is a danger that the historical study of religion might become 'so particularized as to be incommensurable with anything else'. The reflexive introspection of the field, as well as the quantity and quality of 'area studies' research, have vastly increased since the days of Eliade et al. While the postmodern critique has in some ways had a negative impact on comparative studies, addressing the issues it has raised enables the potential for a renaissance of responsible comparativism, one which would not have been possible in the pre-postmodern past.

Finally, a few words should be said about the methodologies of previous studies of afterlife conceptions cross-culturally (some of their conclusions will be considered in Part III). While some may typify a particular unfounded assumption, bias, or methodological flaw familiar from many comparative studies, many have a multiplicity of such problems.

Many are evolutionist, displaying an overt Christian bias (Alger 1864; Kohler 1923) or an insupportable grand diffusionism (Raglan 1945); and/or a perception of the beliefs of small-scale societies as absurd and incoherent (Pringle-Pattison 1922); and/or a mishandling of ancient and 'Eastern' religions (Von Hügel 1912; MacGregor 1992). Almost none of them address issues of diffusion and intertextuality in discussions of historically-related traditions (though Couliano 1991 and Zaleski 1987 are over-reliant on them). An equally common feature is that they do not actually make comparisons or analyses. Instead, they merely survey and over-generalize various beliefs (Addison 1932), sometimes highlighting cross-cultural similarities, then failing to attempt to explain them (Mew

1903; Vulliamy 1926). Three such works also consider NDEs and related experience, though the quality of scholarship declines exponentially over time (Couliano 1991; Ma'súmián 1995; Miller 1997).

Others assume reductionist single 'prime-mover' theories relevant to a particular discipline, such as psychology and/or structural anthropology (Dunne 1961; Brandon 1962, 1967); or are simply concerned with different research questions, such as the relationship between beliefs about death, bereavement, and the origins of religions (Bowker 1991). Henderson and Oakes (1963) adopted a Jungian perspective focusing on correlations between afterlife conceptions and shamanism as an initiatory practice, though not in relation to the content of shamanic visions. Davies' (1999) concern is with social change and cross-cultural connection *within* the ancient Mediterranean, ultimately to place Jewish and Christian afterlife beliefs in context (cf. Bernstein 1993 focussing on hells, and Russell 1997 on heavens).

Other studies are at least conceptually closer to the present one. Though not specifically focused on the afterlife, Andrew Lang (1898: 3) compared 'savage' religious/supernatural beliefs with 'similar *experiences* among living and educated civilized men' (i.e. from psychical research). The work is marred by the evolutionism typical of its time, and by an uncritical extrapolation of prehistoric conceptions from those found in contemporary small-scale societies, resulting in unfounded generalizations about the 'development' of religion. It is often well-reasoned, however, in voicing dissatisfaction with theories which ignore the possibility that experiential phenomena influenced religious belief. Elbé (1906) has similar evolutionist problems, along with an apparent Theosophical agenda, and outdated science. Paton (1921) limited his sample to ancient traditions, though his outline of the evidence for spiritualism in antiquity in relation to the psychical research of his time has no real cross-cultural analysis or discussion.

Hick's (1976) landmark book compares afterlife beliefs cross-culturally (primarily in Christianity, the Vedas, and Buddhism), with some reference to parapsychology and much to philosophy. While the study has some of the usual drawbacks (evolutionism, mishandling of ancient sources, lack of consideration of diffusion/intertextuality, and an agenda of reconciling Eastern and Western beliefs into a 'global theology of death'), the work remains important for its lucid, sophisticated arguments and for the force

of its conclusions rather than for its comparative methodology. Grof and Grof (1980) conduct a thoughtful Jungian consideration of afterlife conceptions in ancient and modern images and texts in relation to related experiences. However, in the brief and introductory text intended for a popular audience, differences are understated, similarities are overstated and overgeneralized, and conclusions are inexplicit (cf. Grof 1994, and Grof and Halifax 1977 which has greater depth).

Platthy (1992) surveyed NDE-type texts from Classical antiquity with reference to modern NDEs. Though his use of the sources is erudite and the collected translations of obscure relevant passages useful, the study makes no contextual or generic distinction between mythical underworld descents and purportedly factual NDEs. Some parallels are drawn with texts of other traditions, though Platthy does not address the issue of diffusion/intertextuality; and the significance of the relationship to modern NDEs is little explored. Bremmer (2002) also considered NDEs in his study of diverse ancient Mediterranean afterlife conceptions, though while the understanding of the religions themselves is sophisticated, comparisons with the NDE are unsystematic and lacking depth, and interpretation of texts is heavily weighted towards an emphasis on difference.

In summary, no comparison has been undertaken using the methodology outlined here to systematically explore in depth the relationship between afterlife conceptions and related experience, particularly not with a focus on temporally, geographically, and culturally distinct civilizations. Instead they are either (often superficial) surveys with no clear research question; methodologically unsustainable attempts to address questions similar to those addressed here; or are simply concerned with entirely different questions. Few have specifically addressed the issue of cross-cultural similarities; and none have done this to any great extent. The issue of cultural continuity/intertextuality is rarely considered, even between traditions with demonstrable cultural interchange over long periods of time. Similarities between Medieval and modern NDEs in Western Christians (Zaleski 1987), for example, are hardly surprising. If the key question is the extent to which such conceptions/experiences are universal, there is little empirical sense in comparing beliefs of one tradition over time, or between those which are historically/culturally/geographically interlinked.

Chapter 2

Early Civilizations, Contact, Diffusion, and Cultural Continuity

The term ‘early civilization’ is used here in the anthropological sense of ‘the earliest form of class-based society that developed in the course of human history’ (Trigger 1993: 6). In this usage, despite vast temporal and geographical distances, the Mesoamerican civilizations are just as ‘early’ as Old Kingdom Egypt, and relative chronology between the two is largely irrelevant. When recognizably Maya culture first emerged, Egypt was firmly under Roman domination; and when Mexico was conquered by Spain, Egypt had been converted to Islam for nearly nine hundred years.

Though some of the civilizations considered here were composed of city-states (Mesopotamian and Mesoamerican) and others were ‘territorial states’ (Egypt and China), they are nevertheless characterized by broadly similar social and economic structures based on wide class division, elite control of resources, and little or no ideological distinction ‘between the natural, the supernatural and the social’ (ibid. 7). India may or may not be an exception to one or more of these descriptors: while the Vedas do not appear to have emerged from a centralized state society, the evidence is uncertain. India does, however, clearly share with the others characteristics such as sedentism, agriculture, literacy,¹ and monument-building.

The issue of cross-cultural contact is central to the question of universalism in determining if shared elements are a result of diffusion or if they are independent occurrences (known in anthropology as ‘Galton’s Problem’). According to Dumézil (Littleton 1982: 4–6), similarities between various Indo-European mythologies are without parallels in the ancient Near East (cf. Lincoln 1991). Since two of our civilizations are Near Eastern (and non-Indo-European, as are China and Mesoamerica), the

implication is that the similarities should not occur. Jorgensen (1974: 200–1) wrote that if the cultures sampled are independent of each other,

... one does not have to appeal to prejudice, or to authority, or to one or two possible examples, or to impression, or to polemic to demonstrate the merit of the hypothesis and its validation. One can appeal to theory ... that logically integrates wholly axiomatic principles and that asserts that ‘these relationships are this way because this is the way the world is.’ ... if the data are independent ..., the relationship very seldom occurs by chance.

The civilizations considered here have thus been selected according to two criteria: (1) that they are believed to have emerged largely in a state of cultural independence; (2) that they produced an indigenous religious literature containing descriptions of afterlife experiences prior to periods of significant, discernable external cultural influence. For Egypt it is before the first period of foreign rule, by the Hyksos from the Levant (the Second Intermediate Period). For Mesopotamia it is prior to the rule of the Indo-European Kassites which ushered in an era of increased internationalism when ‘it is no longer possible to treat Iraq as though it were isolated – or almost isolated – from the rest of the world’ (Roux 1964: 202). For China it is before the introduction of Buddhism from India, ‘the last stage during which Chinese civilization may be studied as a relatively self-contained growth’ (Bodde 1975: 36). For India it is before influence from the re-importation of Buddhism from China (and, incidentally, primarily before the Buddha). For Mesoamerica it is before the Spanish conquest and the forced conversion to Christianity. These criteria are not to imply that later conceptions are less authentic or less representative of belief in general – it is simply that they are more likely to have been influenced by other traditions. The sources under consideration here have no known forebears or previous models upon which they could have been based, which means there can be no claim of intertextuality. Nor can there be such claims regarding consistencies with the NDE. For example, if the Maya afterlife conception and an NDE in modern India bear similarities, this clearly demands an explanation; and it would be extremely difficult and highly speculative to construct a chain of connections by which one could have influenced the other.

Most of the world's remaining religious traditions either grew out of others, or had enough continual significant contact with others as to make their relevance to the question of universalism relatively marginal. Classical Greek religion emerged from Mycenaean religion,² which itself emerged from Minoan religion. The Minoans had an exceptionally close relationship with Egypt (as did the later Greeks), and were trading with them and Mesopotamia from at least the Middle Minoan period (c.1850–1550). Roman religion is largely dependent on Greek religion. Judaism arose from the general Near Eastern cultural milieu, particularly the local Canaanite religion which itself was influenced by Mesopotamian and very possibly Egyptian religion (Davies 1999: 63–4; Currid 1997). Christianity and Islam, of course, have their roots in Judaism, as well as clearly incorporating other local elements. Zoroastrianism seems to have emerged from the same root tradition as the Vedas, and was also a Near Eastern religion with extensive connections throughout the ancient Mediterranean. Buddhism and Jainism emerged in a Vedic context, while indigenous Japanese religion (Shinto) was influenced by Chinese Buddhism. Even the earliest Japanese texts such as *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* drew on myths from 'Polynesia, China and elsewhere' (Smart 1989: 133). There are no indigenous Tibetan religious (Bon) texts prior to the introduction of Buddhism; and no texts on Celtic, Norse, or other Western European religions written prior to Christianity (barring an occasional brief Roman description). What is known of the afterlife conceptions of past non-literate societies is almost invariably filtered through foreign colonialist and/or missionary unskilled 'ethnographers', with often overt biases and a syncretic, missionized version of local belief.

Whiting (1954: 296) argued that the most cautious option for comparative studies relating to universalism is to choose only one civilization from any given linguistic or geographical area. The present study roughly corresponds with these suggestions, though my second criterion has limited the geographical span – there is no surviving textual evidence from early civilizations in Oceania or South America. Egyptian language is Afro-Asiatic. Sumerian is a linguistic isolate belonging to no known language family. Akkadian, like Egyptian, is Afro-Asiatic, though it derived its script from Sumerian cuneiform; and is in any case marginal to the study. Chinese is part of the Sino-Tibetan family. Sanskrit is Indo-European. The Mesoamerican traditions actually have two separate

language groups, Uto-Aztecan and Mayan. Caution is required in considering this as further indication of cultural independence, however: Driver (1974: 110) has cited ethnographic examples in North America where language is wholly unrelated between groups but culture is nearly identical; and conversely groups with closely related languages and wholly different cultures. Indeed, the Sumerians and Akkadians were culturally indistinguishable despite their different language groups (Roux 1964: 140). Bodewitz (1991: 1) pointed out that despite common Indo-European links (via Persia), Greek religion does not share the focus on light that India and Persia do. It should also be pointed out that some of the civilizations are vastly separated from the others both geographically and temporally, most particularly Mesoamerica and Egypt: nearly 8,000 miles as the crow flies, and 4,000 years between the earliest Egyptian text and the Spanish conquest.

It is important to clarify that I do not claim that any civilization ever emerged in total cultural isolation, or that there is such a thing as a 'pristine' society. Nor do I claim that there was no contact at all between any of the civilizations during the periods under consideration – only that they emerged in as indigenous a context as exists, and have the least possibility, and minimal evidence, of significant influence from the others.

Bruce Trigger (1993; 2003) took a similar approach in his cross-cultural comparison of the phenomenon of civilization itself. He considered all the civilizations discussed here, with the exception of India on the grounds of lack of sufficient information on social structure, economy, and so on. Instead he chose the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Inca of South America, both excluded from the present study due to their lack of primary religious texts in their early stages (as are the Olmec, who were apparently subsumed into other Mesoamerican cultures nearly two thousand years before the Conquest [Coe 1989: 162]). Trigger (1993: 13) stated that 'there is no evidence of historical relations' between the civilizations during their formative periods:

[The] archaeological evidence makes it clear that each of these civilizations evolved separately and largely independently in its own region.... If diffusion accounted for major similarities ... those civilizations that were geographically closest and therefore most

easily accessible to one another ought to have displayed the greatest similarities (2003: 38–9).

That diffusion is not a significant factor here is supported by the fact that there are far more differences between, for example, the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia (two of the closest together), than between Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica (two of the farthest apart). Despite their relative proximity, Egypt and Mesopotamia ‘can be treated as essentially independent examples of early civilizations’ – which is more crucial than ‘whether or not [they are] totally pristine’ (Trigger 1993: 13).

Before proceeding further, it is worth reviewing the earliest origins and cross-cultural connections of each civilization considered, and to assess in further detail the likelihood of diffusion as an explanation for the existence of cross-cultural similarities.

It is believed that the Nile Valley was originally populated by immigrants from North-East Africa and the Sahara c.10,000 BCE. There was a further influx between 6000 and 5000 BCE from the surrounding desert areas. Each of these groups would have had their own traditions and beliefs, though some were likely also shared. Upper Egyptian (i.e. southern) culture eventually subsumed the Lower (northern) and the pharaonic civilization was the eventual result (Baines and Málek 2000: 12; Shaw and Nicholson 1995: 226). References to different burial customs in the *Pyramid Texts* may reflect ‘a diverse ethnic population during the Predynastic period’ (Mark 1998: 115), though there is archaeological evidence of cultural continuity from the earliest artefacts of the Predynastic Badarian period (c.5500–4000 BCE) through to the Old Kingdom and subsequent Egyptian history.

Although Egypt was trading with Anatolia, Iran, the Golan Heights, the Red Sea, and Nubia as early as c.4500–3300 BCE (ibid. 14) (i.e. at least 900 years before *Pyr.*), the only identifiable cultural impact comes from Mesopotamia. Scholars of the ancient Near East, however (e.g. Dalley 1998: 14–15), often infer more influence than is clear from the evidence. One example is that Mesopotamian writing (appearing c.3500 BCE) ‘inspired’ the *idea* of writing in Egypt, though hieroglyphic characters have a long genesis traceable at least back to 4000 BCE (Arnett 1982); that is, before writing proper in Mesopotamia, and before the appearance of Mesopotamian-style artistic and iconographical motifs in Upper Egypt

(c.3500–3200 BCE [Mark 1998: 10–20]) where the earliest hieroglyphic inscriptions occur. Nevertheless, if cultural elements such as iconography can be transmitted, so can religious beliefs. Mark (1998: 115) argues that Osiris was either a Mesopotamian import or a syncretistic Mesopotamian-Egyptian deity. This is based on a common use of the two ideograms meaning ‘seat’ and ‘eye’ to designate both Osiris and the Babylonian deity Marduk. The suggestion is highly speculative, however, for Osiris is widely thought to have evolved indigenously from the Predynastic deity Andjety. While the origins of the gods are obscure, Osiris is attested as least as far back as 2500 BCE and is prominent in *Pyr.* a century later, whereas Marduk did not rise to prominence until c.600 years later. Furthermore, though both were associated with fertility, Marduk was not an afterlife deity like Osiris. Overall, identifiable influences seem to have been transitory or minor: the borrowed iconographic motifs disappeared by the Early Dynastic (c.2950–2575 BCE [Dalley 1998: 14f.]); and two deities from Byblos make minor appearances in Egyptian texts: Khay-tau is a ‘guardian of the celestial gates’ in *Pyr.*; and Baalat is a demon in *CT* (Meeks and Favard-Meeks 1996: 49). Generally speaking, Egypt was culturally resistant to external influence (Mark 1998: 120).

The Sumerians may have migrated to Mesopotamia from an unknown area c.5000 BCE, though their origins are unknown. By that time, the region had been settled by other groups for around a thousand years, and Semitic words occur in even the earliest Sumerian texts (Kuhrt 1995: 12, 26). Trade with Iran, Syria, and the Arabian peninsula began in the fifth millennium (ibid. 22); and with Afghanistan from at least 3100 to 2900 BCE (Pollock 1999: 6). In the Uruk period (4000–3100 BCE) trade began with the Indus Valley as attested by various luxury items, some of which bear Indus iconographical motifs (ibid. 94, 114). Claims that Mesopotamia heavily influenced Indus Valley culture (e.g. Dalley 1998: 14–15) seem to interpret the existence of similarities as evidence for diffusion. Notwithstanding limited trade, evidence for significant Mesopotamia-India (or vice versa) cultural influence is virtually non-existent.

The origins of Vedic civilization is a hotly debated topic, with some scholars claiming it is the result of an imposed Aryan culture following an invasion or migration; and others claiming it is largely indigenous. Archaeological evidence for cultural continuity of the pre-Aryan Indus Valley Dravidian civilization (originating c.2500 BCE) includes generic

religious installations such as sacrificial altars and purificatory baths, along with more apparently culturally ‘Vedic’ elements such as a seated figure depicted on seal-stones which may be an early representation of Shiva, and phallic-shaped stones (*linga*) like those associated with him (Flood 1996: 24, 28–9). There is also uncertainty regarding where the Aryans originated. They may also have been indigenous to South Asia so that Vedic culture arose from interactions between two indigenous groups (ibid. 31). It has been argued that they came from outside the subcontinent on the grounds of occurrences of foreign names in the *RV*, and references to the horse, an animal believed to have been introduced into South Asia by the Aryans (ibid. 34). However, Lal (2005: 69–71) reviews a great deal of compelling evidence which he claims clearly demonstrates the presence of the horse in India from the Harappan period (2600–1700 BCE), as well as astronomical, archaeological, and geomorphological evidence that the *RV* is at least as old as 2000 BCE – that is, before the arrival of allegedly foreign Aryans.

Whatever the case, based on a re-analysis of archaeological evidence uncovered over the last 20 years, Schaffer and Lichtenstein (2005: 93f.) have concluded that there is ‘a history of significant historical continuity’ which indicates more indigenous development than outside influence:

This is *not* to propose social isolation *nor* to deny any outside cultural influence. Outside cultural influences did affect South Asian cultural development in later, especially historic periods, but an identifiable cultural tradition has continued, an Indo-Gangetic Cultural Tradition linking social entities over a period of time from the development of food production in the 7th millennium BC to the present.

Even supporters of invasion/migration theories acknowledge that influence would have been limited, and that the foreigners became ‘Indianized’, adopting the local culture more than imposing their own (Witzel 2005a: 375). Thus, notwithstanding historical uncertainty, Indian (Dravidian-Aryan) society is understood to have emerged and developed largely from within.

There is evidence for trade between pre-Indus Valley Neolithic India (at Mehrgarh) and Central Asia, Iran, Mesopotamia, and possibly Burma and

China (Lahiri 1992: 409). How much cultural impact these connections may have had is wholly speculative. There was no significant contact between India and China until the first to third centuries CE (Liu 1988: 2–3), well after the latest Indian texts discussed here, and just after the latest Chinese texts. There are at least two loan-words to Chinese from the Indo-European Tocharian language, speakers of which are believed to have inhabited northwest China from at least 2000 BCE. The language is, however, closer to the Celtic-Germanic-Greek branch of Indo-European than to the Iranian-Indic branches (Boltz 1999: 84, 87).

The earliest connection between Egypt and Vedic peoples was via the Indo-Aryan kingdom of Mitanni in northern Mesopotamia in the sixteenth century BCE, approximately a hundred years later than the latest Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts considered here. The origins of Mitanni are obscure, founded either by Indians (Kulke and Rothermund 1998: 31–2) or by a group of Indo-Europeans detached from a main Central Asia-to-India migration. Mitanni fought with Egypt before forming a political alliance through royal marriages (Redford 2001: 422f.). There could thus conceivably have been an exchange of Egyptian and Vedic ideas around the time the *RV* is believed to have been composed (if we reject the evidence for a 2000 BCE or earlier composition). We would then, however, have to accept a Mitanni rather than Indian origin for the Vedas – a wholly groundless notion. Sanskrit words and names relating to Vedic deities and concepts (e.g. Mitra, Indra, Varuna, Surya, Nasatya, *Rta*, and *svarga*) are attested in Mitanni texts, suggesting that Vedic religion was already well-developed (O’Callaghan 1948: 63); and the people of Mitanni apparently became largely absorbed into local Hurrian culture. Direct India-Egypt influence is practically impossible, for approximately two hundred years separate the latest *CT* date from (what is thought to be) the earliest *RV* date.³ Egypt’s highly detailed afterlife descriptions of this time (e.g. in the *Amduat*) bear little similarity to the *RV* descriptions, and there is no similarity of type or function of texts, nor any common names. The lack of impact upon any other aspect of culture makes the notion of influence solely upon afterlife conceptions extremely unlikely. There is no evidence for direct Egypt-India contact prior to the Roman period (Redford 2001: 423), so Egyptian influence on Vedic religion can also be rejected.

Chinese civilization emerged from the interaction and eventual coalescence of diverse indigenous cultural groups of various regions,

originating as far back as 8500 BCE (Chang 1999: 48ff.). According to Liu (2004: 57), Chinese symbols did not all derive from a 'single source': 'There seems to be no horizon of artistic styles at a trans-regional level, similar to the Olmec ... in the New World.' Clay figurines found in China dating from 4000 to 1000 BCE display 'several physical and cultural characteristics which were non-local in origin', including 'long straight or hooked noses', beards, earrings, and 'pointed or flat-topped headgear' which could indicate a Central Asian or Iranian origin (ibid. 88, 91). Similarly, at an eighth-century BCE site (Chou-yüan) two figures with 'unmistakably Caucasoid or Europoid features' have been found, bearing some resemblance to Hittite figurines c.832–810 BCE. While extrapolating race from figurines is potentially dubious given the vagaries of artistic expression, it is significant to the present study that the figures appear to be evidence of shamanism, possibly suggesting that it was imported to China. One of the earlier figures is marked with the same sign used on oracle bone inscriptions meaning 'ritual meditator', or 'shaman'. The eighth-century figures are marked with the Old Sinitic sign for 'shaman' or 'mage', which may indicate itinerant Persian magi working in China (Mair 1990: 36; cf. Liu 2004: 93 on the earlier figurines). However, while foreign shamanism may have reached China, it may have encountered a shamanic culture already in place. There would be nothing to support the notion of Mesopotamia or Egypt (both apparently non-shamanic cultures⁴) influencing Persian and/or Hittite shamanism which then travelled to China.

Siberians are believed to have originated in China, and there is clear evidence for a Siberian origin for 'Native' Americans (genetic, 'craniometric', and 'morphological resemblance'; Crawford 1998: 4). They are thought to have crossed a land bridge at the Bering Strait from c.30,000 BCE, though from the collapse of the land bridge c.10,000 BCE to the Spanish conquest, trans-Pacific contact is generally accepted not to have occurred. There is no clear evidence for contact during that time, so that if any did occur it would have been in minor, isolated incidents unlikely to have resulted in significant cultural influence. There is substantial archaeological evidence to attest to the indigenous development of Olmec civilization *in situ*, c.1200 BCE (Pool 2007: 92), and Olmec religion was the root of the religions of all subsequent Mesoamerican civilizations – a unified, continuous 'great religious

system' (Coe 1973: 10; cf. Bierhorst 2002: 24). Despite the wide geographical and chronological expanses, development of these societies was entirely from within the Americas and without known interaction with non-American cultures.

Nevertheless, some general parallels between Asian and Mesoamerican culture could suggest survivals from the ancient Chinese/Siberian origins. Though 'not widely accepted' (Trigger 2003: 38), the possibility of Central Asian shamanism migrating to the New World cannot be dismissed out of hand – indeed, shamanistic and spirit-beliefs are remarkably similar cross-culturally in these societies even today (Crawford 1998: 25, 30–1). Trigger (1993: 20–1) also accepted that this is at least a possibility, stating that if the Shang and Mesoamerican religions 'are all derived from historically related shamanistic cults dating back to the Palaeolithic period, this might account for certain similarities among all three'. One example is the feathered serpent which, of course, does not occur in nature⁵ and thus cannot be explained in terms of observations of similar environments. Another is the practice of placing a jade pearl in the mouth of the dead (Hultkrantz 1967: 162). However, as will be discussed in [Chapter 10](#), there are difficulties with suggesting a common core of shamanic experience/visions (as opposed to practices) cross-culturally. There are also no linguistic affinities between Mesoamerica and China (e.g. no shared names of deities); and the lack of evidence for shamanism in Egypt and Mesopotamia again means that shamanic diffusion theory cannot clearly be extended farther than, perhaps, India.

While it is just about possible to posit a chain of connections from Egypt to Mesopotamia to India to China to Mesoamerica, aside from the lack of evidence there are nearly insurmountable problems of chronology due to the different time frames of the periods under consideration. It would be extremely problematic to explain diffusion of particular ideas unaccompanied by further cultural specifics across such vast expanses of time. Diffusion cannot specify how or when concepts travelled from one culture to another, or why some were adopted and others not. There is no apparent chronological progression of beliefs, and no clear sequence of transmission. The only evidence for direct trade connections are between Mesopotamia and Egypt, and to a lesser degree between Mesopotamia and India, and even less between India and China for the periods under discussion; and these resulted in no clearly discernable shared deities

(with the exception of the minor Byblite references in Egyptian texts), iconography (other than the odd transitory motif), rituals, creation myths, funerary practices, and so on.

The last remaining diffusionist argument to discuss is that worldwide similarities can be accounted for by diffusion from a single common origin – usually Africa, where human population-groups originated. This would assume that early humans had afterlife conceptions which survived for millennia in oral form following migration to other parts of the world, to be eventually written down in culture-specific modes. There are numerous problems with such speculations.

First is the assumption that prehistoric individuals even had afterlife beliefs at all. While Carr (1995) has demonstrated that burial practices *usually* relate to afterlife beliefs, without the aid of texts or demonstrable cultural continuity archaeology can only suggest varying degrees of plausibility of such beliefs, based on ethnographic analogy. Grave goods may be tributes or memorials to the deceased; or may concern the living rather than the dead, as with the Nankanese of Ghana who place in graves articles belonging to a living person so that he/she will not die; and the Ibn of Borneo who place knives in graves to symbolize the dead individual being severed from the living (Parker Pearson 1995: 1047–8). Conversely, an absence of grave goods does not equal an absence of belief. The LoDagaa of Ghana have well-developed afterlife conceptions, though consume most funerary offerings (Ucko 1969: 264–5). It is also the case that status, not religion, is often the determining factor for corpse position, location, orientation, and grave goods (ibid. 270). Furthermore, even if the *fact* of prehistoric afterlife beliefs could be established, the *nature* of the conceptions is unknowable, let alone their origins.

Second, the main migrations out of Africa *c.*75,000–85,000 BP are believed to have occurred some 40,000 years before the evolutionary mind-brain development of ‘cognitive fluidity’, believed to be necessary for abstract thought; for example, afterlife conceptions (Mithen 1996: 175).⁶ This is also a problem for Witzel’s (2005*b*: 63–4; 2001) theory that hypothetical ‘early Laurasian shamans’ or ‘spiritual leaders’ of *c.*75,000 BP are the common source of certain beliefs (including ‘the shamans’ concept of birth-death-rebirth’) across the world to this day. Laurasia was a super-continent comprising North America, Europe, and much of Asia (excluding India) which broke up in the late Mesozoic, *c.*200,000,000 BP –

that is, around 199,800,000 years before *homo sapiens* originated in Africa. Why 'Laurasian' cultures would allegedly have more in common with each other than with those of anywhere else is unclear. Witzel's theory revolves around numerous mutually reinforcing unproven assumptions: the existence of a monolithic Laurasian proto-mythology; that it can be 'reconstructed' by projecting the beliefs of historical civilizations onto multi-regional and multi-temporal prehistoric ones; an enormous (and largely unfounded) grand diffusionism of beliefs and practices; and that there was such a thing as a prototypical early Laurasian shamanism.

Furthermore, grand diffusionist theories do not account for why only some elements of beliefs/culture/concepts/practices remained consistent and others changed or were not adopted (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1963: 248); nor why afterlife conceptions spread unaccompanied by creation myths, common deities, names, language, artistic styles, iconographies, and the like. While there are certainly other traits shared cross-culturally, including some mythological motifs, they do not have the same overall consistency of a distinct set of similarities, which are paralleled in documented experience (i.e. NDE). Diffusionist theories cannot explain how afterlife conceptions across such vast stretches of space and time could relate to historical and modern NDEs which are unsought, unexpected, spontaneous occurrences. Such an explanation here must be able to address the commonality of such experiences worldwide, experienced by individuals of multiple faiths (and none), throughout recorded history, in multiple cultural contexts.

To summarize and conclude, it is extremely problematic to hypothesize wide-ranging and significant temporal and geographic cross-cultural connections which could have resulted in the transmission of ideas necessary to explain the results of the present study. While no civilization develops in a cultural vacuum and even the earliest texts do not come from strictly culturally-*isolated* civilizations, they are relatively *culturally-independent within the boundaries of their general cultural spheres*. While Chinese/Central Asian diffusion to the Americas after 10,000 BCE is *possible* (though lacking significant evidential support), it would not account for similarities with other civilizations. Grand diffusion is also *possible*, though almost entirely speculative and fraught with difficulties.

Doniger (1998: 133) argues that since there is no such thing as a pristine society 'it is more likely that one culture borrowed the story from the other than that the story was independently created, in parallel, by both cultures'. Because she uses intimately connected Greece and Rome as an example rather than two wholly unconnected civilizations such as Egypt and Mesoamerica, she is not engaging with the issue using a logical sample, and is thereby drawing a conclusion based upon inadequate evidence.

Though Lévi-Strauss (1963: 248) favoured diffusionist explanations, he did not favour *assuming* them without evidence. He also wrote that if diffusion occurred,

... it would not be a diffusion of details – that is, independent traits travelling each on its own and disconnected freely from any one culture in order to be linked to another – but a diffusion of organic wholes wherein style, esthetic conventions, social organization, and religion are structurally related. (ibid. 264)

This cannot have been the case with the present study where diffusion would have to have been of a single recurring consistent set of afterlife themes (i.e. an 'organic whole'), though one expressed in culture-specific ways *independent of* the 'style, esthetic conventions, social organization, and religion' of the hypothetical originating culture. As Chang (1980: 357) observed, 'universal patterns and separate paths are not mutually exclusive'.

Chapter 3

Near-Death Experience

Reports of NDEs occur in wide geographical and temporal distribution, in approximately ‘10% of people who come close to death, or who survive actual clinical death’ (Fenwick 2005: 2).¹ Reports are found in both technologically advanced civilizations and in small-scale societies, from ancient to modern times, in all parts of the world, appearing variously in religious, literary, anthropological, scientific, and medical literature.

While even the most sceptical researchers acknowledge that there is a consistent core of typical sub-experiences which make up the NDE (Fox 2003: 100), they do not always agree on what it is. The various attempts to isolate it by identifying the most consistently recurring elements have not proven wholly adequate. Ring, for example, defined the core experience as feelings of peace and well-being, out-of-body experience (OBE), entering darkness, seeing bright light, and entering the light – excluding highly recurrent elements such as meeting other deceased individuals and reaching a border or limit (Fox 2003: 31). Others have reduced the universal core to but two elements, though these differ according to researcher: darkness and light (ibid. 139); ‘seeing other beings and other realms’ (McClenon 2005: 113); journeying to other worlds (usually an idealized mirror-image of earth) and meeting fellow spirits (Kellehear 1996: 32). Kellehear points out, however, that the OBE may be taken for granted in almost all descriptions – NDErs do not claim that their experiences occurred in the physical body. Other commonly reported features are ‘the subjective sense of being dead’, ‘beautiful colours’ (Fenwick 2005: 2), hearing others discuss one’s own death, a loud noise, feelings of joy, a sense of profound wisdom or universal understanding, heightened senses and clarity, the impression of having an ethereal body, acceleration of time and thought, precognition and clairvoyance, telepathic communication with other spiritual beings, a sense of belonging or that

one has returned ‘home’, a life review accompanied by a sense of moral evaluation or self-judgement, being instructed or deciding to return, returning (often reluctantly), and positive effects on the life of the NDEr (Moody 1975; Greyson 1985). Zaleski’s (1987: 123) characterization of the NDE as ‘a catalogue of assorted motifs’ is perhaps the most useful way of thinking about the experience. To redefine the ‘core’ as a changeable collection of possible elements drawn upon differently by different individuals to comprise the overall experience prevents the imposition of structure and order where none may exist, and allows for a strictly phenomenological consideration of the NDE. The popular Western conception of the NDE as such may not be universal, though it encompasses particular sub-experiences which are.

The issue of whether the NDE constitutes evidence for survival after physical death is largely beyond our scope,² though it is of some relevance to the metaphysical theories discussed in [Chapter 11](#). The most comprehensive attempt to explain the NDE in reductionist terms has been by Blackmore (1993) who claims that it is the hallucinatory result of a combination of neurophysiological and psychological events and processes of the dying brain. Such perspectives have been criticized for a priori reductionism, and for being dismissive of what they cannot explain (Paterson 1995: 139–49). There are numerous claims of evidential OBEs in which NDErs report having seen and/or heard things while clinically dead – and from places or perspectives impossible from the vantage point of their bodies – which were later independently verified (Serdahely 1996). There are reports of children encountering deceased relatives they had never met (Serdahely 1990: 38); and of NDErs who discover the death of a friend or relative by meeting them during the NDE, or have visions of the future which are also later verified (Delacour 1973: 20; Ring 1980: 207–8; McClenon 1994: 173; Parnia 2005: 83ff.; Sartori 2005: 296).

Such claims are anecdotal and without empirical replication;³ and metaphysical interpretations of the NDE have been criticized for a perceived lack of scientific logic and the inapplicability of empirical testing. However, Fenwick (2005: 4) stresses the significance of the fact that NDEs in cardiac arrest patients occur when the individual has a flat EEG reading, when there is ‘no possibility of the brain creating images’ and ‘no brain-based memory functioning’, meaning that ‘it should be impossible to have clearly structured and lucid experiences’. Sartori

(2005: 291) concurs, stating that the implication is ‘that consciousness is not dependent on the body, but can function apart from it’ (cf. Rivas 2003). Nevertheless, Parnia (2005: 190) claims that it has not been conclusively shown that the experiences do in fact happen during flat EEG readings.

Whatever the case, the present study seeks neutral ground, adopting the position that:

- Whatever their nature, NDEs are part of human experience and as such are a valid area of research, and can be used as comparative data in a contextually appropriate way – particularly in light of their apparent universality, and parallels with the ancient texts;
- Science-based claims of veridicality make these experiences especially worthy of consideration;
- Methodological or theoretical fashions are not valid reasons for ignoring any area of study, or for refraining from engaging with difficult and/ or unpopular issues.

NDEs are not determined by religion, sex, age, or other demographic factors (Ring 1980: 106, 132). Though individuals may be influenced by ‘imagery and metaphor’ in popular and religious culture (Becker 1981: 154), it has been found that prior knowledge of the NDE actually *decreases* the likelihood of having one (Ring 1980: 136); and that there is no difference between Western NDEs reported before and after 1975 when the phenomenon was popularized and the term coined by Moody (Long and Long 2003: 29).⁴ NDEs in children are largely consistent with those of adults, further demonstrating that it is not ‘primarily’ a matter of cultural conditioning (Bush 1983: 177). They also occur in congenitally blind individuals who nevertheless report *visual perception* during the experience (Fox 2003: 216–18).

As with religious phenomena, the issue of universality is controversial in NDE studies, with some researchers promoting cross-cultural difference at the expense of similarity. For example, in his assessment of perhaps the earliest Western NDE account which explicitly claims to be factual (related by the Greek philosopher Clearchus of Soli, c.310 BCE), Bremmer (2002: 92–3) states that the only similarity between the account and the modern NDE is a ‘feeling of drifting away’. This is despite clear references to typical NDE elements such as OBE, meeting deceased

relatives, moral evaluation assisted by mystical/divine beings, and clairvoyance. In a study of Chinese NDEs, the researchers (Zhi-ying and Jian-xun 1992: 46) seem to have interpreted cultural/individual expressions of typical NDE elements as dissimilarities. Sensations of weightlessness and ‘feeling estranged from the body’, for example, must surely be equated with the OBE. ‘Unusually vivid thoughts’, a feeling that thought has sped up, a sense of peace and euphoria, and a life review are all standard NDE elements reported by their subjects. Murphy (2001: 170) states that there is no being of light in Thai NDEs – despite reports of the Buddha appearing as a star, and an encounter with ‘spiritual lights’ (ibid. 176). He also states that Thai NDErs do not report feelings of bliss, ecstasy, peace and the like, but rather ‘pleasantness, comfort, a sense of beauty and happiness’. Rather than seeing these as analogous emotional states, he sees discontinuity (ibid. 172). Encounters with deceased friends and relatives are similarly classed as dissimilarities because they do not specifically *greet* the NDEr, but rather *instruct* him/her (ibid. 175). Murphy’s (ibid. 170) conclusion that ‘accounts of Western NDEs would seem to be useless in helping Thais know what to expect at their deaths’ is not supported by Thai references to OBE, travelling in spiritual form to another realm, life review with moral evaluation, encounters with divine/mystical presences, positive emotions, transcendent feelings and an impression of knowing ‘all the truths of the universe’, visions of the future, deceased relatives, and being instructed to return (ibid. 175).

Likewise, Zaleski (1987: 131) highlighted differences between medieval European accounts of ‘otherworld journeys’ and modern Western NDEs. In descriptions of moral evaluation, the former focus on punishment and the process of judgement, whereas the latter are more concerned with education and rehabilitation. Borders and limits are threatening and perilous in medieval accounts, but not in their modern counterparts (ibid. 138). Medieval guides are figures of ‘hierarchical and feudal authority’, while the modern equivalents are characterized by ‘benevolent parental acceptance’ (ibid. 188). However, *differences in the way such structural elements are experienced, interpreted or expressed do not invalidate the importance of the similarities*. The mechanism of judgement, the nature of the barrier, and the role or character of the guide are clearly shaped by sociocultural context; though their underlying structures remain moral evaluation, borders and limits, and guides. The fact that these elements

occur cross-culturally at all, even within these wide variations, is in itself significant – particularly when we consider that the medieval texts also feature OBE, seeing the body, having an ethereal body, distortions of time, tunnel or path, other realms, deceased relatives, beings of light, life review, expanded consciousness, ‘glimpses of heavenly bliss’, being sent back to the body, reluctance to return, and subsequent spiritual/moral transformation (Zaleski 1987: 7, 136, 138, 187–8).

Thus, despite a general thematic consistency, there are clearly cultural differences in NDE phenomenology (as discussed earlier, acknowledgement of similarities does not negate differences, or vice versa). One recurring difference is the *reason* for the return to the body. In the NDEs of some societies, the individual is most often informed (e.g. by a deity/ being of light or deceased relative) that it is not his/her time to die, and/ or that he/she has further responsibilities on earth.⁵ In others, it is often because of a discovery that the individual’s ‘death’ was a case of mistaken identity – that he/she was accidentally ‘taken’ in place of someone with the same name.⁶ Both types of reasons feature in some societies,⁷ while there are exceptions to these patterns and unique reasons in all. Murphy (2001: 175) argued that the reason Thai NDErs are not given the choice of whether or not to return is that Thai culture is not as individualistic as Western culture. However, this falsely over-generalizes the Western NDE, which commonly features a forced, reluctant return.

The wide cultural distribution of *both* reasons for return makes diffusion unlikely; for example, that modern Thailand borrowed from medieval Europe, or that the contemporary West borrowed from medieval China. The recurrence of the themes as well as their distribution rather suggests socially- and culturally-constructed interpretations of a general ‘return’ element. In other words, the rationale for the NDEr’s return to the body is culture/individual-specific, though being instructed to return (for whatever reason and by whatever being) is highly recurrent, and the return itself is obviously universal.

This is not to rule out intertextuality,⁸ or to ignore culturally-embedded interpretations and expressions of the NDE. Medieval European ‘otherworld journey’ narratives are greatly influenced by earlier Christian visionary literature, such as the various versions of the vision of St. Paul (Zaleski 1987: 6, 27). Their length, intricate detail, and obvious embellishment remind us that this is a *literary* genre (Gardiner 1989: xiv)

as opposed to an historical one. Likewise, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mormon NDEs are characterized by motifs which reflect and reinforce Mormon belief, including guardian angels, an afterlife government, and a socially stratified, highly organized spirit world with buildings, gardens, and Sunday School (Lundahl 1982: 166ff.). This suggests intertextuality and/or deep religious-cultural immersion, though the appearance of common NDE features (OBE and seeing the body, darkness, being of light, life review, universal understanding, deceased relatives, positive after-effects) strengthens the case for universality. Likewise, ancient and medieval Chinese narratives display clear Taoist and Buddhist elements (Campany 1990: 102), as well as familiar elements of the NDE: OBE, ascending to other realms, deceased relatives (ibid. 103–4), spiritual beings, judgement, being sent back, and positive after-effects (Campany 1995: 35).

Some differences are clearly due to the contexts of the narratives. In the Medieval European texts, for example, ‘harsh judgement scenes, purgatorial torments, and infernal terrors’ (Zaleski 1987: 7, 187–8, 136ff.) are common. Hellish scenes are also common in the Chinese narratives (Campany 1990: 124). In both, the context is overtly one of moral proselytizing. While negative NDEs are known to occur, they are ‘extremely rare’ (Ring 1980: 193; cf. Fox 2003: 259f.) and not cross-culturally consistent. Bremmer (2002: 100) observed that the medieval texts focus more on punishment than their pagan forebears, for the simple fact that they reflect the focus of Christianity at the time. This can also be applied to the relative lack of the motif in modern Western NDEs. It is also worth remembering that many such narratives were written in times and places without secular contexts for the objective reporting or study of the NDE, and that they nevertheless present the experiences as factual and relating to specific individuals. Furthermore, McClenon (1994: 170) points out that the Medieval European accounts often ‘do *not* conform to the image of the afterworld that was commonly accepted’ at the time, particularly in their descriptions of intermediate states (i.e. before the introduction of the idea of purgatory). Similarly, an early twentieth-century Zuni NDE includes encounters with deceased relatives and bright light – motifs which are inconsistent with Zuni afterlife conceptions (Wade 2003: 94–5).

Conversely, certain expected religion-specific elements are not reported at all. For example neither Hindus nor Western Christians describe salvation, redemption, or reincarnation (Fontana 2005: 403). NDEs are thus, in part, independent of their cultural context and therefore universal. Another example of a culturally-specific manifestation of a universal thematic element (i.e. difference embedded in similarity) is an Indian version of the life review, wherein the individual is commonly read a document outlining his/her good and bad deeds (as is done by the god Citragupta in Hindu mythology) (Fenwick and Fenwick 1995: 231).⁹ This issue also has ramifications for reductionist arguments based on the alleged biological universality of each element of the experience. For example, Price (1953: 31–2) suggested that a brain function which normally restricts the flow of memory ceases at death, causing memories to flood the consciousness, resulting in a life review. A lack of accounts of such experiences in India and in small-scale societies¹⁰ (Kellehear 1996: 32, 334) demonstrates that the panoramic life review as such is not universal and therefore cannot be entirely biologically constructed.

Some differences are also clearly individual-specific. Though *yamatoots* – messengers of the afterlife deity Yama who take the deceased to judgement and to hell – are typical of Thai NDEs, they are described in highly individualistic ways: for example, ‘two white-robed young men’, three men in turbans, or one man three times larger than an ordinary human (Murphy 2001: 172). Jung’s (1963: 136–8) highly individualistic NDE involved floating in space a thousand miles above Ceylon and encountering a Hindu man dressed in white, sitting in the yoga lotus position at the entrance of a temple hollowed out of a meteor. It also featured the thematic elements of OBE, other realms, being of light, border, feelings of being ‘home’/ belonging, cosmic understanding and unity, life review, and a forced, reluctant return.

Yet other differences may be due to idiosyncratic researcher methodology. For example, only Delacour (1973) reported experiences of receding landscapes/people; only Hampe (1975) reported returns to the body via a reverse NDE; and only Tylor (1873: 50–2; cf. Kellehear 1996: 31; 2001) reported NDEs in which the NDEr cannot eat food in the spirit realm or he/she will be unable to return to earth.¹¹ Whether these can be seen as specifically French, German, Maori and Dakota Sioux cultural elements (respectively) is unclear with so few examples.¹²

Other attempts to negotiate the issues of similarity, difference, and universalism in NDE studies have been problematic, often because of mischaracterizations, over-generalizations, and simplifications of the phenomenon. McClenon (2005: 173), for example, claims that ‘non-judgemental NDEs are functional for pluralistic societies, where people from different ethnic, social and religious groups live in close proximity’. The connection is obscure, however, for (a) the NDE *is* typically ‘judgemental’ in the highly pluralistic modern West; and (b) NDE judgement is of the self, not of others in the social group. Bremmer (2002: 101) argued that a lack of meeting deceased relatives in medieval Western NDEs is a reflection of the ‘rather cold’ personal relationships individuals had with each other in that era. Evidence for the ‘coldness’ of medieval personal relationships is not provided; and deceased relatives *are* a highly recurrent feature of the medieval texts. Bremmer also wrote that modern NDErs do not experience guides because the afterlife realm is no longer conceived of as being far away. Again, his basis for this claim is unclear: the afterlife realm is virtually never characterized as being physically near (indeed, the notion of physical location is irrelevant) or easily accessible; and again, guides *do* feature regularly in the reports, often in the form of relatives or a being of light.

Nevertheless, there do seem to be some NDE elements which correspond to social organization or population size. Elements which are common only in small-scale societies include the afterlife realm being located in or accessed via an earthly locale, and especially mode of transport. In small-scale societies, the NDEr often walks along a road to the other realm rather than travelling through a tunnel. This is the case with Kaliai Melanesian NDEs, which also regularly feature culture-specific elements such as ascending a ladder towards a house (Counts 1983: 115–16), and a predominance of earthly-type places (houses, villages, forests) (ibid. 130); along with typical NDE elements of OBE, darkness, light, deceased relatives, instruction to return and a reluctance to do so, barrier or limit, moral assessment, and other realms. Travel by road is also typical of the Chomorro people of Guam (Green 1984); and of Native American NDEs, along with other realms, judgement or other assessment, guides, barriers, darkness, idealized mirror-images of earth, joy, an encounter with a deity, being instructed to return, and positive after-effects (Wade 2003: 101–2; 105–8). While the ‘road’ concept has not

been addressed specifically, Kellehear (1996: 36–7) suggests that the ‘tunnel’ is associated with industrialization. The key issue, he argues, is not why tunnels are frequently reported, but rather why Westerners often interpret ‘darkness’ as a tunnel. He adds that ‘Western people have grown accustomed to seeing strange new worlds through the dimness of tunnels’, for example, telescopes and microscopes; and that the tunnel is simply a symbol of transition – something that leads from one place to another. However, architectural tunnels have precisely the same function in the East; for example, India, where NDE tunnels are not reported. India also has vehicles with which one may quickly traverse tunnels. The sensation of speeding through a dark tunnel with a light at the end in order to get from one place to another is thus not limited to the West (nor indeed is seeing ‘strange new worlds’ through optical equipment). Furthermore, all manner of subterranean structures and passages were built in the ancient world (tombs, temples and divinatory installations, water works, etc.), though the tunnel motif is not explicit in the ancient texts. Kellehear is surely correct, however, that the key factor is not the tunnel at all, but the experience of entering darkness and transition from one realm to another; and in his argument that the use of the word ‘tunnel’ is due to limitations of language when trying to describe an ineffable experience, for ‘shape reflects architecture rather than experience, but it is experience that is being described’. In fact, ‘ineffability’ is often cited as a key element of the NDE. Furthermore, the modern NDE stereotype of travelling through a tunnel has been overemphasized, and in many reports the individuals actually speak only generally of moving through darkness (e.g. Moody 1975: 32ff.; cf. Kellehear et al. 1994: 111–12).

Bremmer (2002: 102) similarly argues that it was only the inventions of the train and of cinema in the nineteenth century ‘which enabled people to see a fast succession of scenes’, allegedly explaining why life-reviews do not feature in ancient and Medieval texts. The first problem here is that individuals have been travelling at respectable speeds by horse and boat since prehistory. Secondly, life reviews are not typically successional, but are often described as all the events of one’s life (and associated emotions) occurring *simultaneously*. Finally, there *are* reports of pre-nineteenth-century life reviews (e.g. that of British Admiral Francis Beaufort in 1795; Audette 1982: 31).

Kellehear's (1996: 37–8) explanation of the cross-cultural similarities and differences of the life review is more intriguing, though also not without difficulties. The 'sense of self' he argues, 'is a social construction of identity which only came into being with 'historic religions'.¹³ This newfound individuality created a divine/human dichotomy, and the concomitant notion of divine and human realms. Almost by definition, this concept resulted in a view of the self as flawed, and a desire to become more divine-like. Small-scale societies have less distinction between the self and that which is external to the self, and therefore less distinction between the mundane and the divine, and between myth and reality. 'Anxiety, guilt, and responsibility' are of the *world*, not merely of the individual, and 'individuals are no more responsible than the world'. Moral behaviour is encouraged by laws and fear of consequences within the social group, not by ideas of heaven and hell. For example, when told by missionaries that they were sinful and in need of redemption, the Arunda aborigines became indignant and declared that they were *all* good. Without a sense of individual moral responsibility or guilt, the 'life review' concept is culturally irrelevant. Historic religions, on the other hand, all stress 'the cultivation and development of the moral self *vis-à-vis* the divine world and its demands'. Their afterlife experience is therefore directly linked with conscience (itself a result of the self/god schism which is linked with identity) (ibid. 38). However, there are cases of Native American and Kaliai¹⁴ NDE moral evaluation/judgement (Wade 2003: 110; Counts 1983: 121) which contradict Kellehear's generalization about small-scale societies and demonstrate personal moral conscience. Perhaps even more problematic is the (quasi-)universal *belief* in an afterlife fate determined by character or moral worth, including in both small-scale and archaic societies¹⁵ (and a high degree of divine/self dichotomy in the latter). Furthermore, as Kellehear (1996: 40) himself pointed out, the life review may also occur in non-NDE contexts in small-scale societies; for example, in dreams and shamanic experiences.

Zaleski (1987: 127) has argued that viewing the being of light as a cross-cultural similarity with a cultural overlay is to deny the testimonies of NDErs themselves. The supposedly neutral term 'being of light' is itself culturally constructed, she asserts, and imposing it on NDE accounts cross-culturally is therefore inaccurate. However, Zaleski's characterization of the NDE as 'through and through a work of the socially

conditioned religious imagination’ entirely denies the testimonies of NDErs who stress the ‘reality’ of the experience; and does not take seriously their claims that it is deeply meaningful, spiritually rewarding, and life-changing.

Zaleski’s argument also sidesteps the facts that NDErs (a) describe a ‘being of light’ in phenomenologically similar ways cross-culturally and interpret it in culture-specific modes (Fox 2003: [Chapter 3](#)); and (b) do not identify it with a religious figure alien to their own belief system (e.g. Christians do not claim they encountered the Buddha, and Buddhists do not claim they encountered Christ). This indicates a cross-cultural experience of a ‘being of light’ with an identification that is culturally-ascribed. As Nicholson (1990: 204) wrote, stating that the being of light is entirely imaginative ‘is much like saying that the red fruit growing on trees is a function of the imagination because it is called “apple” by Americans and “*pomme*” by the French.’ The *Bardo Thödol* (*Tibetan Book of the Dead*, c. eighth to eleventh century CE) offers a strikingly explicit parallel when it states that at death the ‘*Dharma-Kaya* of Clear Light’ (i.e. the Absolute) will be experienced in whatever form will most comfort and calm the individual. As the book’s translator, Kazi Dawa-Samdup (1868–1922), clarified:

Thus, to appeal to a Shaivite devotee, the form of Shiva is assumed; to a Buddhist, the form of the Buddha Shakyamuni; to a Christian, the form of Jesus; to a Moslem, the form of the Prophet; and so on for other religious devotees; and for all manners and conditions of mankind a form appropriate to the occasion. (Evans-Wentz 1957: 94, n.2; cf. Badham 1997: 11)

The description of dying in the *Bardo Thödol*, in fact, so closely corresponds to the NDE that it can effectively be seen as verification that the book genuinely is what it purports to be – a preparation for what happens at death (regardless of whether the dying experience is neurophysiological or spiritual) (cf. Becker 1985: 3; Badham 1990).

Zaleski’s (1987: 193) emphasis on the NDE as ‘religious storytelling’ ignores the issue of similarities between the NDEs of atheists, children, the blind, and across cultures (including those in her own study). Great care is taken to delineate the similarities between the modern and

medieval narratives, only to largely ignore them and focus primarily on claims of their culture-specific invention. Similarly, Becker (1985: 17) stresses the similarities between the NDE and the *Bardo Thödol*, though fails to accommodate those similarities in an argument that NDEs are delusional ‘mental projections’. Because they characterize the NDE as individually created, such perspectives actually imply the impossibility of the existence of the very cross-cultural similarities the researchers themselves identify.

Zaleski (1987: 195) further argues that because experience cannot be divorced from culture, ‘the notion that some original and essential religious experience can be discriminated from subsequent layers of cultural shaping’ is a methodological error, and should be ‘renounced’.¹⁶ In other words, there is no distinction between experience and interpretation. While it is certainly true that experience is inseparable from culture, it does not follow that it is an entirely cultural/individual *creation*. Experience can *originate* in phenomena which are independent of culture, and be realized and interpreted in individual/culture-specific modes. Mourning, for example, is culturally expressed and mediated, though *feeling grief* at the death of a loved one is not a cultural construct (Stroebe and Stroebe 1987: 53–4). The fact that culture influences experience does not prove that objective experience does not occur. Bremmer’s (2002: 93) observation that the NDE account of Thespesius of Soli (related by the Greek historian Plutarch, c.81 CE) contains elements of Platonism, Pythagorism and Orphism thus demonstrates only that experience can resemble belief – not that it is dependent upon or based upon the belief. In fact, the situation could well be the reverse, as will be discussed in [Chapter 10](#).

Ultimately, an acknowledgement of individual/culture-specific mediation/interpretation of the NDE does nothing to invalidate the theory that there is a consistent *thematic* core to the phenomenon. As McClenon (1994: 172) concluded, ‘Zaleski’s data do not demonstrate that NDE accounts are *entirely* a product of the imagination’, but actually the reverse:

Although European NDEs reveal the effects of cultural shaping, Zaleski’s data support the experiential hypothesis because the same

universal elements found in modern NDE accounts are present in both Medieval Christian and Asian NDE folklore.

While variations between NDEs cross-culturally are partly due to ‘the way certain societies emphasize or downplay certain cultural images and symbols’ (Kellehear 1996: 28), Stevenson and Greyson (1996: 203–4) have argued that the *duration* of an NDE can also account for differences (in conjunction with psychological and cultural factors). The life review may come at a later stage in the dying process, which may account for it being more common in the West where modern healthcare technology which can revive individuals at later stages of near-death is more widely available. The circumstances of the trauma might also be important. The life review, for example, seems to occur most frequently in sudden or unexpected ‘deaths’, though it is rare in attempted suicides.¹⁷

Though more research is required on the duration and sequence of the NDE, what does seem clear is that the phenomenon is not merely a matter of cultural/individual *interpretation*, but one of cultural/individual *perception*. The elusive ‘common core’ may simply be more general and thematic than is often supposed – impressions of objective concepts made manifest by the individual. Osis and Haraldsson (1977: 182) suggested that scenes of idealized earthly beauty are ‘symbolizations’ of the feelings of joy, peace, and calm typically reported by NDEr. This is also consistent with the concept of a mind-dependent afterlife as modelled by H. H. Price, as well as with afterlife ontologies in some of the ancient texts (see the section ‘Metaphysical’ in [Chapter 11](#)).

Kellehear (1996: 29–30) cautions that while ‘certain structural elements, such as, for example, *the presence or absence of review phenomena*’ may be culturally influenced or determined, ‘we must be cautious *in explaining even the smallest detail of NDEs in cultural terms lest our cultural analysis falls prey to reductionist tendencies*’. He adds that ‘only if we have strong evidence that these NDE accounts are purely subjective, like dreams, can we link even small details of the NDE content to culture and biography’. While this is an important point, it is perhaps overstated: an NDE does not have to be ‘purely subjective’ (as opposed to partly subjective and partly objective) to contain identifiable culture/individual-specific elements. Kellehear also acknowledged the implications of his claim – that all the worlds and beings encountered in

NDEs are actually empirical (again, see the discussion regarding H. H. Price in the section titled ‘Metaphysical’ in [Chapter 11](#)). Serdahely (1995: 194) has suggested that NDEs are ‘individually tailored’ to give the individual what he/she needs for the most productive ‘learning experience’. That the nature of the experience is in part determined by the NDEr’s psychological and emotional states is demonstrated by the woman who had two NDEs – one positive and one negative. Zaleski (1995: 203) similarly suggested that the purpose of otherworld ‘visions’ is that they provide ‘the imaginative means through which one can instil a religious sense of the cosmos’ in order to provide orientation in the present life. However, why such a ‘learning experience’ would most commonly occur when an individual is threatened with the *end* of life is not explained; and indeed the idea ignores the fact that the NDE is a phenomenon most often associated with dying. Nor does the suggestion explain the process by which the ‘learning experience’ is mediated/created/dictated, that is, by whom it is ‘individually tailored’, and how.

The extent to which interpretation – by both NDErs and researchers – might affect the classification of elements as similarities or differences is also an important methodological issue. Zaleski (1987: 54–5), for example, identifies the ‘bridge’ motif in the medieval European accounts with the ‘tunnel’ in modern NDEs. However, these two elements may not be thematically comparable: the medieval bridge acts as a *barrier* to the ultimate state in the other world, while the modern tunnel is a means of transportation to an apparently intermediate state. The medieval bridge may more aptly be seen as a border or limit; with the tunnel being analogous with ascent and generally travelling through darkness. Furthermore, accounts of experiences not only rely on unverifiable, subjective, individual testimony which is always subject to the vagaries of memory and the tendency to emplot, but we also do not know if particular elements were not experienced or simply not recorded (e.g. due to being forgotten, or being considered unimportant). As noted earlier, OBEs are not always reported, though NDErs do not claim to have travelled to another realm in their bodies. Darkness is another element which could easily be left out. As Kellehear (2001: 34) summarized:

... culture supplies broad values and attitudes to individuals and these provide individual orientation during an experience. In this way,

cultural influences provide a basis for interpreting NDE content, and furthermore are crucial to shaping the retelling of the experience to others from one's own culture.

When related to others from a different culture, it is likely that further construction and modification occur.

In summary, in the historical and modern Western, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Indian and small-scale society accounts, NDEs reflect established local beliefs, *as well as* sharing consistent sets of structural similarities. This consistency of reports distinguishes NDEs from other types of 'mystical' experiences, visions, and dreams. Cross-cultural differences can be explained by the fact that NDEs are shaped by culture and by individual 'personality, circumstance and religious belief' (Fenwick and Fenwick 1995: 242). Yet, while NDEs are undeniably culturally/individually-influenced and experienced, and their expression often elaborated or mythologized, they are not entirely culturally constructed.

This chapter constitutes a sort of microcosm of the present book, in that it encapsulates the main questions and issues, as well as the difficulties with comparative analyses of belief and related experience – the interaction of which will be further examined in [Chapter 10](#).

Part Two

Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations

Chapter 4

Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt

Introduction

The Old Kingdom *Pyramid Texts* first appeared c.2350 BCE, though internal evidence suggests the content is even earlier.¹ They were apparently initially intended for the exclusive use of the pharaoh, though after c.2200 they also appear in pyramids of queens. They contain ritual texts intended to ensure the survival of the deceased in the realms beyond, and to provide him/her with the knowledge and formulae to successfully negotiate the afterlife perils and obstacles, and to join the gods in the divine realm.

There is a general continuity of conception between *Pyr.* and the Middle Kingdom *Coffin Texts* (emerging c.2160–1760), and indeed much duplication. The texts, in fact, should not be regarded as discrete corpora, but rather as earlier and later versions of a continuous tradition with the same religious functions (Assmann 2001: 248ff.), revised and expanded over time. The *CT* also represent a so-called ‘democratization of the afterlife’, where such texts were now painted on coffins which were available to any elite who could afford them (Hornung 1999: 9). Absence of evidence not being evidence of absence, the paucity of information on popular afterlife conceptions prior to *CT* does not mean, however, that no one conceived of an afterlife but royalty (as seen below). Rather than ‘democratization’, it is likely rather a case of materially manifest popularization – that is, preexisting afterlife beliefs of the populace (perhaps hitherto limited to oral tradition) became visible in the archaeological/textual record.

Later (New Kingdom) afterlife texts such as the *Book of Going Forth by Day*² and the *Amduat* also continue the *Pyr./CT* tradition, with roughly two-thirds of the former drawing upon, and even duplicating, the earlier texts (Allen 1974: 2). They mainly simply elaborate upon existing conceptions, adding extensive details and lengthy enumerations of regions of netherworlds, types of punishment, names of beings, and so on. They do not significantly supplement or contradict the earlier works for the purposes of the present study.

As the texts were generic templates to be personalized for the particular deceased person (Allen 2005: 6), references to such individuals will be omitted.

The Pyramid Texts

Recent research has suggested that the *Pyr.* spells were intended to be read in a particular order from one tomb wall to the next (Assmann 2001: 240ff.; Allen 2005: 2). There also appears to be a spatial-ritual-textual interaction with the tomb architecture, which mirrors Egyptian afterlife cosmology: in the ritual context, the various passageways and chambers represent the various phases and realms through which the deceased travels (ibid. 10–11).

Despite advances in research on the order of the texts, a ‘logical’ narrative sequence of a linear afterlife progression eludes us. This is because while the function of a section may be discrete, the contents are often not. For example, though a section may be intended to facilitate the transition from one realm to the next, it can contain references to what the deceased will do or has done in a different phase. The texts are also extremely repetitive, with similar occurrences described for different realms/phases (e.g. multiple modes of ascent, cleansing, and divinization in nearly every category of text). Whether this reflects the cyclical nature of the afterlife, ritual/architectural restrictions, or a lack of concern for linear narrative structure is unclear. Whatever the case, incorporating various incantations, ritual formulae, and liturgies from different sources, *Pyr.* cannot be considered a single, cohesive whole.

All this makes a strict adherence to the ritual order problematic when attempting a summary of afterlife conceptions in *Pyr.* which does not impose linear progression where none may exist. Because of this, discussion will follow the apparent intended order of the texts, though different versions of the texts will be consolidated into a composite for more coherent reading. While this may technically violate the integrity of the texts of a particular pyramid, the texts are consistent enough that this does not create a serious concern.

Following offering and mummy rituals are spells for the nourishment of the deceased in the afterlife (W139–45).³ Prayers ask Re and Thoth (ibis- or baboon-headed god associated with knowledge, and later scribal assistant during judgement of the dead) to take the deceased to dwell with them, sail in the celestial boat (the sky being seen as cosmic waters), and eat and drink as gods do (W143). As far back as the Early Dynastic (c.3100–2686 BCE), the word for ‘god’ (*netjer*) was also used for the spirits of the dead, and it is not known which meaning came first (Hornung 1983: 42).

These spells are followed by the Resurrection Ritual, intended to release the *ba* from the body (Allen 2005: 8). The first line states that the ‘deceased’ has departed alive, not dead; and he/she is instructed to sit on the throne of Osiris and govern both the living and the dead (W146), and the Mounds (‘settlements’; *ibid.* 437) of Horus (falcon-god associated with kingship), Seth (chaos-god, fratricidal brother of Osiris, defender of Re), and Osiris (W135). His/her body parts undergo ‘member apotheosis’ (Hornung 1994: 136), each being identified with the god Atum (W146), the source of creation, associated with the setting sun. Atum is also the deceased’s father, who brought him/her into being before the creation of the earth, people, the gods, and death (P511). There are numerous references to fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters, though it is not clear if any of them are to be considered earthly relatives of the deceased or if they are all divine. According to one passage (N910) he/she does not have human parents at all.

After a warning about ‘the Great Lake (i.e. the morning sky; Allen 2005: 431) that leads to the *akhs* and the canal that leads to the dead’, and to avoid being led to the ‘dangerous, painful’ *ba*-house (Nt242), the deceased ascends with Re, his/her bones becoming ‘falcon-goddesses in the sky’. He/she is to be bathed in the ‘cool waters of the stars’ before

boarding the sun-boat ‘on the shoulders of Horus’. Raised by the Imperishable Stars (literally the circumpolar stars, but also gods/divinized individuals), the deceased is instructed to ascend to his father Geb (earth-god, and father of Osiris), during which time he/she will become ‘akhified’ (W147). *Akh* literally translates as one who is ‘effective’ (ibid. 7), though it also means ‘the blessed dead’ (Allen 1989: 4). It is etymologically and conceptually related to the word for ‘horizon’: *Akhet*, or ‘place of becoming *akh*’. When the deceased enters the horizon, he/she is a ‘transfigured spirit that has become one with the light’ (Quirke 1992: 159). That the *akh* was considered to have some sort of spiritual body is evident in the line, ‘You shall gain control over your body, without impediment ...’ (W155). Other likely references to spirits of the non-royal dead (judging by their lower status) are the ‘clean ones’ who serve Osiris (P467), and the ‘honoured ones’ who the deceased helps to feed and give life (P465). The fact that the king becomes a post-mortem judge (below) also implies the presence of souls which need judging.⁴

The deceased, as Horus and Seth, asks for Atum’s protection *from* Horus and Osiris (*sic*) controlling and claiming his/her heart and mind. He/she undergoes further member apotheosis, being ‘completed as every god’: the parts of the face are identified as different deities, each referred to as an Imperishable Star (including Anubis, jackal-headed god associated with embalming, and ‘official of the judgement hall’ [Allen 1988b: 46]). Each limb is associated with one of the four sons of Horus (Hapi, Duamutef, Imseti, and Qebehsenuef, who correspond to the four canopic jars holding the organs of the mummy, and deify the cardinal points). The deceased is told he/she will not die (W148), and that his/her ‘identity will not perish’ (N305).

With Orion (the constellation, associated with Osiris) and Sothis (a goddess associated with the star Sirius), the deceased ascends on the Nightboat to be ‘encircled by the Duat’ (W149) in the ‘undersky’, or sky below the earth (e.g. W155). The Dual Ennead (two groups of nine gods) see the deceased’s entry to the Duat and say, ‘Look, Osiris is come as Orion’ (P38), and he/she becomes a judge among them. The Dual Ennead (or ‘the Ennead’s Body’ [P476]) also descend to the Duat with the deceased, and take off their clothes to show that he/she has made their hearts sound. The deceased is thus ferried on a causeway called Sound of Heart, via the Marsh of Rest which provides spring water (cf. Stork Lake,

‘the drinking place of every *akh*’ [P324]). On an island in this Marsh, the Imperishable Stars (in the form of swallows) give the deceased a ‘plant of life’ (P466). The *ba* and *ka* are spiritually purified (‘to remove the bad that is against you’) and renewed, and the *akh* clothed (P42–45). In the Duat he/she will live a pleasant and happy life (P155): ‘sadness has ended, laughter has come’ (N350).

Dangers include beings such as the Coiled One (a snake with fiery venom) (T17), monstrous female donkeys and hippopotamuses. Gates of Horus and Osiris, guarded by gatekeepers, must be passed through by means of revealing the identity of the deceased (T9). Resplendent in plumage and clothes from the gods, he/she emerges among his/her ‘brothers the gods’ (T20).

The deceased is introduced to Atum-Re (a composite of both deities), and told he/she will join the circuit through the netherworld, the *akhet* and ‘the above’. Various gods will announce to the others that the deceased has arrived, and that he/she has the power of life and death over them, and over their hearts and minds. He/she will then be worshipped by ‘the *akhs* in the water’ (W150); and the Watchers – mummiform entities restored to life as the sun passes through the netherworld (Allen 2005: 443) – will dance.

The deceased is then commended to the gods, most notably Osiris who is told that he/she has surpassed him in weariness, greatness, soundness, and acclaim (W151). A Litany of Identification with Osiris follows, in which various gods and their various identities are told that the deceased *is* Osiris reborn (W152). The ‘decay’ of Osiris and the efflux of the deceased (i.e. the fluids of the corrupting corpse) are equated with each other, with water, and with the inundation of the Nile (P30). Because Osiris is the god of fertility, the inundation, and the dead, there is a conceptual link between death, decay, and rebirth through life-giving waters: it is from death and the netherworld that life emerges. The deceased is commanded: ‘Raise yourself like Osiris!’ (T144), and becomes a composite deity version of the god with jackal’s face, falcon’s arms, wingtips of Thoth (W472), and lion’s tail. Osiris gives up his throne so that the deceased may rule over those in the Duat (N412), including the gods (W155).

The emergence from the Duat is ‘the god’s birth’ (W158). Conceived by the sky in the Isle of Flame (the first matter to arise from the primordial waters; *ibid.* 434) where the deceased was the one to impose Maat (the

deified principle of cosmic order, truth, justice), he/she is delivered by the Ennead as the Morning Star (W159). The journey is thus a return to the origin point.

The deceased ascends from the Duat on the first of the lunar month and crosses the Winding Canal (the path of the sun; *ibid.* 9) on a wing of Thoth *and* in a ferryboat, ‘to the eastern side of the sky’ (P521) ‘where the gods are born’ (W320). Led by Nut and announced by the ferrymen, the deceased reaches Re in the Akhet, who guides him/her to the ‘sky’s dual shrines’ and places him/her on the throne of Osiris (P4). Horus’s four sons will wash his/her face (T181).

The deceased also becomes Nefertem, the deification of the blue lotus from which the sun was born (W160); and Sia (Perception), the deification of intelligence and wisdom (W161). The acquisition of knowledge gave power over demons and other dangers, was a prerequisite for divinization, and helped socialize the deceased into the afterlife community by identifying him/her to the inhabitants as one of them (Assmann 1984: 67). The stars and gods of the Duat are warned that the deceased is ‘a great god’, armed and dangerous, and to be feared (W158, W162). Dangers now include ‘travelling in darkness’, ‘those who are upside down’ (i.e. the netherworld denizens), and fire (W170). Thoth will protect the deceased on the journey by decapitating and removing the hearts of enemies (P327).

Through the gate to the Akhet and along a path cleared by Isis (maternal goddess, sister/wife of Osiris) and Nephthys (her sister, a protector deity), the deceased is ferried by Re himself, and other ferrymen (T185). Two sycamores (a tree associated with mother- and sky-goddess Hathor; Shaw and Nicholson 1995: 295) are grasped by the deceased, and they ferry him/her to the ‘eastern side of the sky’ (P507). As a star in the undersky, an immortal *akh* who ‘cannot truly die’, the deceased ‘will render judgement as a god’ (T187), ‘shining as a god’ (Nt244). He/she receives a ‘dazzling garment’ (T220), and is dressed in the Marsh of the Beetle (P321). Nut reassembles the bones, limbs, and head of the deceased (as Isis reassembled Osiris, dismembered by Seth), and he/she ascends further as the ithyphallic fertility god Min (Nt243). The deceased emerges at the voice of Anubis, who transfigures him/her into Thoth so that he/she may control the skies and the gods (P31). Passing through the Akhet, the deceased is greeted by his/her mother, the Beautiful West (deification of the setting sun, the direction of the netherworld). The deceased is warned

against taking the western pathway, at risk of not returning (N564). Horus instructs him/her to row to ‘the god perched on his high tree’ in the Marsh of Offerings (i.e. the offerings to the deceased/god by those on earth), and he/she arrives by climbing the sunshine (T227) or striding across the sky. Tefnut (leonine goddess associated with the sun, the moon, and water) arranges plots for the deceased there and in the Marsh of Reeds. The latter is the deceased’s home ‘among the Imperishable Stars who follow Osiris’ (T225), where other *akhs* work the land to provide sustenance for him/her (P31).

‘Apes who sever heads’ are told that the deceased ‘has tied his head on his neck’ and will pass them peacefully, and others who might harm him/her are warned (W165).

His/her mother is instructed to row so that the deceased may ‘acquire the sky’ and lead Re. In the cosmic circuit they will be joined by the Duat-gods as they set, and by the sky-gods as they rise (W167–8). The deceased transcends the limits of the earth and sky, becomes the moon and Thoth (P353), ‘the fire in the wind’s top’, traverses lightning, the atmosphere between the primordial waters and earth (deified as Shu), the Akhet, and will ‘stand up on the eastern side of the hail’ (W171). In the Akhet there are no further obstacles – no ferryman demanding fares, no barriers to ‘the White Palace of the great ones at the Beaten Path of Stars’ (perhaps the Milky Way;⁵ Allen 2005: 427). The deceased now ferries the Nightboat and bails the Dayboat him/herself, and is raised to Re by the clouds (W172). ‘Four senior *akhs* at the fore of the braid-wearers’ (juvenile deities; *ibid.*) reveal to Re the deceased’s nickname (W173). His/her identity is not known even by his/her own mother (W180a). Elsewhere, the deceased is instructed not to reveal the name of a god with whom he/she is being identified (Nt242).

The Akhet is crossed by ascending ‘the smoke of a great censuring’ (i.e. funerary ritual incense smoke), on ‘a footpath to the sky’, and as various kinds of birds.⁶ The pilot of the sun-boat is told to allow the deceased to navigate the perilous marshes through the Akhet (W174). When they emerge the deceased will alight as a beetle, and will be nurtured by Isis, nursed by Nephthys (W206) and Ipy (a hippopotamus goddess associated with birth) (W176). At Stork Mountain, the deceased seeks his/her two mothers, ‘vultures with long hair and pendant breasts’, to be nursed by them forever (P357). He/she will be ‘purged’ (P458) in the Jackal Lake by

Horus, who will also further release his/her *ka* from the Duat Lake (W175). The deceased is also bathed by various gods in the Lake of Reeds (T8), with Re (P502), in Shu's lakes (W155), the Lake of Tresses (P289), the Nurse Lake (P320), and the Marshes of Reeds (W164), Winnowing (N564), and Turquoise (P324).

Various ferrymen are asked to transport the transformed deceased, who ascends from the Duat on a ladder made by Re, with Horus and Seth acting as psychopomps (W178). The Portal of Nu (deification of the primordial waters) is assured that the deceased is not leading gods of chaos, but followers of Re (W179). Those who protect the deceased include Grasper of Forelocks, Serpent with Sweeping Head, and Gory All Over, who will lasso, imprison, knife, disembowel, and cook any opponents. Snakes are particular threats, but also centipedes and worms (i.e. types of creatures who might disturb a mummy in a tomb; *ibid.* 7) (W182–204).

In a spell for Entering the Akhet's Eastern Limit, it is stated that the deceased 'lives on the evolution of every god [and] eats their bowels when they have come from the Isle of Flame with their belly filled with magic'. He/she 'eats people and lives on gods', consuming and absorbing their power, wisdom, hearts, and their *akhs*, thereby becoming integrated in the divine realm (Assmann 2001: 59). The deceased controls even 'the controlling powers', and is 'senior to the senior ones'. As Lord of the Akhet, continuity is the lifetime of the deceased, and eternity is the limit (W180).

In the Spells for Leaving the Akhet the gods of all four quarters are asked to provide the boats used by Osiris to cross to the Cool Waters. More ferrymen are called upon to transport the deceased (W205) (accompanied now by the 'unwearying ones' and the Imperishable Stars [P453]), including the 'doorkeeper of Osiris': an 'abomination' called Summoner who requires a fare (P450). Various beings are greeted and asked to allow the deceased to pass (e.g. Anubis's daughter, and 'ostrich at the Winding Canal's lip') (W209).

Despite the fact that the deceased becomes supreme judge, he/she is not beyond judgement. The Herd of Justification (P510) refers to those who have successfully come through afterlife judgement, or have been 'justified'. The Dual Maat (W170) refers to the gods who stand on either side of the deceased in the court during judgement (Allen 2005: 433–5). The deceased's innocence is proclaimed (W207), and his/her 'annals' read

aloud by a god. The deceased asks that they be read truthfully and in their entirety (P450). It is proclaimed that he/she was never arrested, put on trial, or even accused (D548). He/she then stands between two ladders made for Osiris, one by Re and one by Horus, and is interrogated regarding his/her purity and divinity: 'Are you a god of clean places?'. He/she is also told by Horus to stand, and by Seth to sit (apparently referring to the spirit rising to stand at the head of the gods, in order to be seated in the shrine [P476]).

Re gives his arm to the deceased, at which point the text proclaims, 'Akh to the sky! Corpse to the earth!' (W210). The deceased becomes a cloud and a heron (P469), is described as both 'Brotherly' and 'Sisterly', and is associated with numerous deities, male and female (P460). Anubis commands that he/she descends as a star (P484), and at the sky's door he/she descends 'into the boat like the Sun on the Winding Canal's shores' (P495).

Further demons are warned to stay away, including a 'gored longhorn' (W219), a baboon ('executioner of the damned' in the New Kingdom; Meeks and Favard-Meeks 1996: 44), and the 'great black one'. Identified now with both Osiris and Re (P495), the deceased enters the sky as 'a screeching, howling baboon' (W220). The sky is reached by *descending* in a lightning-boat with Re, along the Winding Canal, 'to the marsh of the two underskies' (i.e. north and south; *ibid.* 205) (P495). The door of the sky is commanded to open, in a 'blast of heat where the gods scoop water', and the gods create a path for the deceased (W218), delighting in the spectacle of his/her ascent. Led now by a cow-goddess 'so that Isis may receive him and Nephthys might beget him', the deceased is seated among the gods. The Imperishable Stars and 'those in the Akhet' come to him in obeisance (P450). He/she is identified with Sobek (crocodile god and deification of the power of the sun), and will rest in the green marshes of the Akhet, making the vegetation there green. He 'is lord of semen',⁷ who 'takes' any woman he chooses.

Spells against a reversal of the earthly order in the netherworld affirm that the deceased will eat with his mouth and defecate with his anus, breathe through his nose and ejaculate through his penis (P376),⁸ and will live on dates and offerings rather than urine and excrement (T286). The deceased is cleaned in the Marsh of Life by Qebhut, daughter of Anubis (P463); perfumed with myrrh; and described as 'a bull with sunlight in the

middle of his eyes, [whose] mouth is a fiery blast', who controls gods, cultivates precious stones and trees, and unites the skies (W224).

Finally, yet another ferryman is instructed to fetch a ladder called Salve of Contentment on Osiris' Back for the deceased to ascend with the Sun (W226). The sky is crossed on reedfloats, to reach the Akhet 'where the sun is' (P481).

Teaching for King Merikare

Falling between *Pyr.* and *CT*, the First Intermediate Period *Teaching for King Merikare* (50–60; Simpson 2003: 158–9) states that the 'tribunal which judges sinners' is 'not indulgent'. They 'regard a lifetime as but an hour', and judge the deceased based on his/her 'deeds' which are placed before him/her like a treasure, playing 'before their eyes in a single hour, as though it were a biographical film' (Assmann 2001: 74). Those who have 'done no wrong' become god-like for eternity. Life reviews and moral accountability are also evident in the numerous Old and Middle Kingdom autobiographical funerary texts which list positive actions and behaviours along with denials of negative ones, intended to be recited by the deceased at judgement in the afterlife (e.g. in Simpson 2003; cf. *CT* VII; Robinson 2003: 148).

The Coffin Texts

With the exception of the disappearance of a stellar afterlife, there is little from *Pyr.* which does not reappear in *CT*. There is an intensified focus on Osiris, perils, and judgement; clear reunions with deceased relatives; and less focus on ascension and ritual bathing.

Though there is clearly some ritual significance to the groupings and placements of the texts (Assmann 1990), recovering a sequence of events is again problematic. Especially vague is the order (if any was intended) of the numerous gates, portals, and paths of the afterlife regions, and discussion will thus be largely thematic. *CT* incorporates *The Book of Two*

Ways – a more systematic guide to the afterlife presented in a more linear form – which will be considered separately at the end of the section.

Contrary to *Pyr.* is a spell *against* being ferried east (CT 548). The god Tekem ‘opens up the Western horizon’ for the deceased to enter (II.367), Atum opens the ‘outer door’ (1007), and Khons (moon-god) opens the ‘great door’. The deceased is met by ‘the grey-haired ones’ (i.e. spirits of the old), and followed by the ‘silent ones’ (IV.364). He/she assembles friends, servants, concubines, associates, and relatives (V.335). A newly deceased son meets his previously deceased father in the Island of Fire ‘to make a doorway into the netherworld’ (I.161). Foes of the sun dwell in caverns on the Island (II.213).

Seven rooms are referred to in a ‘Spell for proceeding to the gates’ (901), all with female guardians, including Mistress of the blessed, ‘the fiery one, Lady of punishment’, ‘the Lady of life, mistress of provisions’, ‘Lady of the house of the horizon’, and ‘her who is hidden, mistress of paths’.

The deceased is warned against going ‘on the roads of the knife-wielders’ (I.226). Assisting Re in his fight against the snake-demon Apep is a recurring theme (e.g. II.48). Other perils include crocodiles, vultures, pigs, and beings who ‘take away a man’s soul from him’ or ‘take a woman’s heart from her’ (342; 424f.; 440; 441). In a spell intended to be recited when the deceased ‘enters into the West’ (335), Re is asked for protection against Horus who binds ‘evildoers at his slaughterhouse’ and destroys souls; against the ‘slayers’ who follow Osiris; against the ‘Swallower of myriads’ (guardian of the Lake of Fire [IV.327]) who has a dog’s face and human skin, who captures his victims with a lasso, ‘lives by slaughter ..., swallows shades ..., but is not seen’; against Seth ‘who takes souls, who laps up corruption, who lives on putrefaction’; and various others unnamed, armed with knives, vats, and fish-traps. The deceased also risks being captured in nets by ‘fishermen of men’, and by Osiris (343). In a variation of *Pyr.*, the deceased asks ‘female apes of the sky’ to cut off their own heads until he/she passes (VI.237).

Anubis guards the portal to the Beyond (VII.26), and three further portals are described (336). The first, created by Sekhmet (aggressive leonine goddess), is fifty cubits long, wide as the horizon, filled with blue flame, and overseen by the Swallower of Myriads. The second is overseen by ‘He who is in the great flame’ (IV.325–8) (Seth). The third, where the

deceased encounters Thoth, is personified as a goddess, streaming fire as she descends from the sky.

There is a Tribunal in a Broad Hall (I.158), and a 'Great Tribunal' in the Marsh of Reeds (V.209). Annihilation is the greatest penalty following judgement. According to Hornung (1994: 316), judgement is not a final reckoning but a purification which enables the deceased to continue to the other world. Netherworld terrors are portrayed as obstacles rather than eternal torments, though the fate of those who do not overcome them is the Great Void (I.197), that is, annihilation. Elsewhere, the deceased instructs Osiris to judge him/her, for he/she has judged Osiris (VI.452). As the deceased becomes Osiris in death, this is effectively self-judgement.

Denizens of the netherworld interrogate the deceased regarding how many fingers he/she has (398), and what he/she will eat in the netherworld. Replying to the latter, the deceased describes abundances of bread and beer in the Marsh of Offerings (203). Shu guards a gate leading to a ferry in which the deceased, accompanied by two black storks, will be taken to 'the Mansion of the Ibis-faced ones' and to the Lotus Bark to obtain bread and milk. There are seven ferrymen, also called 'spirits' (V.174), perhaps corresponding to the seven rooms/gates. One awakens Aken (vulture-god) who will bring a boat built by Khnum (creator- and Nile-god) (V.81-3), each part of which is identified with a particular body-part of a god.

Rowed on a path called 'the Power of Earth' towards the Marsh of Reeds, (V.105), the deceased escapes the 'place of execution', crosses the Sacred Place, and over a waterway with Osiris. The Marsh of Reeds is enclosed by an iron wall (I.369), and has 'secret ways and portals' through which the deceased is ferried (404; IV.296). At the first is a gatekeeper; at the second are the Sisterly Companions (Isis and Nephthys) who try to seduce the deceased, but will 'cut off the nose and lips of whoever does not know their names'. In the third portal, 'the air enters and is cut off'. The gatekeeper of the fourth portal stands with a corn-measurer 'wherewith to measure a man's excrement'. These and the following three portals each greet the deceased, 'Come be a spirit, my brother, proceed to the place of which you know'.

Further spells against the reversal of earthly order in the Duat include walking upside-down, drinking urine, and eating filth and corruption (III.160; 175 etc.). Impurities such as a street-seller hawking excrement (III.99) must be avoided, for impurity prevents transformation to an *akh*.

A spell against dying a second time (i.e. annihilation) is often found together with such spells, explaining the significance of the deceased being questioned about what he or she will eat in the netherworld (Mueller 1972: 120–1).

Grains of monumental proportions grow in the Marsh of Reeds (e.g. barley of four cubits, emmer of seven), ‘reaped by the horizon-dwellers ... in the presence of the Souls of the Easterners’, Harakhti (‘Horus of the Horizon’), a divine calf, and the Morning Star. In the east of the Marsh is the Middle Gate through which Re appears, to the south is the Lake of Waterfowl, and to the north are the Waters of Geese (II.388).

The Marsh of Offerings is overseen by scribes (Double-Master and Name-Repeater) who record the gifts and food belonging to the deceased. The deceased becomes governor of the Marsh, and is referred to as ‘mistress in the Great Mansion’ (even on coffins of men [Faulkner 1973: 154, n.3]) (III.78). The Marsh contains ‘towns, districts and waterways’ (depicted on a plan in *CT* 466), including Town of the Great Lady, Vegetable-Town, Town of Fair Offerings, Provision-Town, Milk-Town, Union-Town, Waterway of the Horns of the Mistress of Purity, and the ‘field-plots of the dwarfs’ which the deceased claims as his/her own (II.161). The Marsh has an agricultural life similar to that on earth. Spells allowing one to avoid labour in the next world (472), and to have sex (576), further demonstrate that the afterlife was perceived in part as an idealized mirror-image of earth. Certain earthly locales are also mirrored in the afterlife (e.g. the Winding Canal = the Nile).

The deceased is ‘cleansed in the Lakes of the Dwellers of the Netherworld among the blessed ones’ (I.130). Following divinization, Isis will reveal to the deceased the divine knowledge of the actions of gods, how to reach Osiris, and the offering table of the gods (34).

The Book of Two Ways

There are two versions of the *Book of Two Ways* – one longer and one shorter – both beginning at sunrise. The long version starts with a spell for the deceased to navigate with Re to the sky, and ‘to the stairway of the bark of Mercury’ (1130). With Isis, Horus, and Seth in the bow, and Hu

(creative force), Sia, and Re in the stern (VII.458), they traverse a ‘circle of fire’ (VII.276).

The deceased is identified with Re and wards off snakes on the ‘paths of Rosetau’ (1034), the centre of the Duat in the ‘limit of the sky’ (VII.282), ‘on both water and on land’ (1072). The paths are maze-like: ‘in confusion’, ‘each opposed to its fellow’. They are situated on the tops of high flint walls, and are watched over by guardians (1036).

The ‘efflux of Osiris’ is hidden in Rosetau, ‘in darkness, with fire about it’ (1080). Elsewhere, Rosetau itself ‘is the corruption of Osiris’ (VII.366). That Rosetau was a goal for the deceased (though not an ultimate one) is clear by the line, ‘He who sees the dead Osiris will never die’ (1050). Knowing the paths of Rosetau makes the deceased a god; otherwise, he/she faces annihilation (VII.283). Rosetau is also a place of rebirth, where the deceased will make the efflux of Osiris ‘raise itself’ (1082).⁹ The encounter with the corpse – *which is also the deceased’s own corpse as he or she becomes Osiris in death* – thus provides the enlightenment which enables immortality. This enlightenment, brought about by the deceased witnessing his/her own decomposition, is the realization that he/she is physically dead, yet spiritually still alive.

On the north bank of the Winding Waterway are towns ‘which are unnumbered’, surrounded by a million cubits of flame, with blasts of fire extending even further. The deceased asks the ‘Protectress of the blast’ to guard him/her from ‘him who would impose any kind of evil obstacle because of Him whose name is “Secret-of-wisdom”’ (VII.459). The riverside paths and bends are guarded by the ‘foe who lives in the Fledglinglake’ (1045), ‘Great-face who repels the aggressors’, and ‘He who is driven off with two faces in dung’ (1056f.; 1059). The deceased is turned back from ‘the lake of fire of the knife-wielders’, for ‘no-one knows how to enter the fire’ (1054). Further paths are guarded by ‘He whose face is covered’, ‘Hippopotamus-face, bellowing of power’, ‘Dog-face, whose shape is big’, ‘High of Winds’, ‘Lord of Striking-power’, and ‘Snake-face, lord of aggressors’ (1043; 1062–66).

A ‘spell for passing by him which is beneath him’ (i.e. a threatening being below the paths on which the deceased travels), names the gatekeeper and subsequent threats as Scowler, ‘He of the loud voice’, Oppressor, Monster, Trembler, and ‘He who is hot’ (1041; 1044). There is also a ‘gate of fire’; and a ‘gate of darkness’ with a keeper called ‘the sad-

voiced one', and entities such as 'Leaper, Fiery, She of the Knife(?), He who curses' (1037–8).

There are two series of gates, with gatekeepers described as 'He who stretches out the bow-warp'; a 'monster' called Aikenty; 'He who eats the droppings of his hinder parts' who is made of various plants and is armed with a throwstick; 'He who glowers, the voluble one'; 'He whose face is inverted, the many-shaped' who lives on those who lack the knowledge to pass; 'He who lives on maggots' and on those who fail to reach the sky; and Aikenty bellowing fire (1100–3; 1108–10). Excluding a 'gate of darkness' in a spell in between (1107), a total of seven gates are mentioned, although it is not clear if they are sequential. Robinson (2003: 149) has interpreted the first four as menacing, and the following three as guides/protectors. Such monstrous-looking figures are depicted in tombs, on coffins, and on late Middle Kingdom ivory wands. The latter served an apotropaic function, particularly for children, suggesting that the entities were protectors despite their demonic appearance (Quirke 1992: 151).

Entities associated with unspecified parts of the netherworld include Head-bringer, Baboon, 'the Centipede-god', the 'Earth-god', and the Possessors of joy, rain, and worship (1088; 1121; 1090). Apep is mentioned frequently, and in one passage (VII.376–7) the deceased saves Re from him as he roars 'on the great plain north of Stretching-the-bows'.

The Valley of Darkness and the Lake of Criminals (VII.390) are presumably places of punishment for the immoral and untruthful. Other than brief references to the Lake of Reeds and the Marsh of Offerings, and to places of herbage and fields (1052), the Book focuses on overcoming afterlife dangers.

The short version of the *Book of Two Ways* is a 'guide to the double doors of the horizon'. Though it duplicates some material from the longer version, its contents are particularly esoteric.

Supplemental and differing elements include the deceased being guided by his/her own *ka*, having become 'Lord of the secret things', that is, Osiris. That the individual has prior knowledge of the afterlife is consistent with the idea that it is the 'home' state.

He/she first comes to a 'gate with fire in front and hidden in the back, with a man in it who is bound'. The path is guarded against 'he who has two faces' by Nu (1132), and an *akh* guards 'the gate of the mansion of Many-faced' (VII.476). 'The Souls of Nekhen' (royal ancestors) attack the

deceased's limbs with fire, though a path is opened for him/her by Hu, who 'speaks in darkness' (VII.479–81).

'He whose mouth is open in darkness', whose horn 'gives darkness, pain and death' (Apep), guards the 'great fiery doors'. Archers shoot arrows at the deceased, though he/she is invisible. The deceased warns them that Apep will 'thrust at' whoever accidentally hits him with an arrow. 'The great baboon who eats the gods' then thrusts at the deceased from above 'with a crane and a danger-bird(?)' (VII.494–5).

A particularly cryptic spell (1146) refers to a mansion of the 'destroyer' who is to be seen by an *akh*; to an invisible man a million cubits tall, in darkness; and to mansions containing 'the path of the goddess, the sacred Eye', Baboon, Chaos-god, Hu, Hound, Protector, She is joyful, He is Prosperous, He is firm, the sky, the earth, and the horizon.

The deceased negotiates a high rampart, guarded by snakes and flames, then reaches a 'pure land' of green fragrant herbs (1139). A path leads to the Mansion of Incense where the deceased's flesh is on fire (1156). In addition to Osiris (56) and Re, the deceased becomes various deities, elements, animals and even grain, including Soped, Thoth, Sobek, Hathor, a scribe of Hathor, birds, Fire, Air, a child, Atum, both male and female, and the serpent-deity Nehebkau 'who takes away powers' (268–78; 285–97; II.161; 84–5).

Summary and Conclusions

The multiple realms, transformations, and states of being found in these texts have sometimes been interpreted as contradictory, or 'unresolved ambiguities', often leading to an imposition of divisive categories on Egyptian afterlife conceptions. Murnane (1992: 42–4), for example, suggested that the solar afterlife was reserved for the king, and the Osirian afterlife and Marsh of Reeds for the populace. Royal journeys to the Marsh of Reeds and associations of the deceased with Osiris in *Pyr.*, as well as associations of the deceased with Re in *CT*, demonstrate that this is not the case. The solar and underworld aspects are clearly two different elements in a 'single, coherent vision of the afterlife' (Allen 1989: 1) – the

process of regeneration brought about by the journey to the netherworld and return through the sky.

Lesko (1972: 136) even questioned whether the *CT* scribes knew what they were doing at all. Given the overall continuity of conceptions over three thousand years, it is reasonable to assume that the Egyptians actually intended to write what they did. Notwithstanding the shifts in focus from *Pyr.* to *CT* noted earlier, the texts do not actually reveal the ideological conflicts often claimed, and the same multiple afterlife goals can be found in each.

For similar reasons we can dismiss the suggestion that Middle Kingdom Egyptians were ignorant of which afterlife was the most desirable to aspire to, and so had alternatives represented in their coffins (ibid. 134). Rather than assume there is something ‘wrong’ with the texts themselves, it is more likely that problems of interpretation lie with scholarship (and the lurking ethnocentrism therein). Specifically, the linear ‘either/or’ mode of thinking characteristic of western monotheism (so often smuggled into interpretations of Egyptian religion, whether consciously or subconsciously) is irrelevant when trying to understand polytheistic concepts of simultaneous opposite occurrences and cyclical unity. As Hornung (1983: 252) stated, for the Egyptians ‘the nature of a god becomes accessible through a “multiplicity of approaches”; only when these are taken together can the whole be comprehended’.

Egyptian religious thought is typified by single concepts having multiple aspects. For example Re, Khepri, Horus, Atum, Aten, Amun-Re (Allen 1997: 119), Osiris-Re, Re-Harakhty and the deceased are all aspects of the sun. The *ba* and *ka* are microcosms of (indeed, one and the same with) the complementary opposites of Re and Osiris, with the *akh* analogous to the Osiris-Re union (Allen 2005: 8). The texts can thus be more productively regarded as deliberate and lucid expressions of an eschatology rooted in the concept of the reconciliation of dualities, meant to indicate the multivalency of the divine world and the divine omnipresence of the deceased (Allen 1988b: 56). Hence, the deceased becomes *both* Re in the sky *and* Osiris in the netherworld, which itself is ‘paradoxically’ located in the sky and under the earth.

The texts reveal an afterlife concept of cyclical renewal and the interaction of life with death (Assmann 2001: 174). Though the texts focus more on the journey than on destinations, it is unclear whether the Marsh

of Reeds was considered an intermediate state on the cosmic circuit, a goal beyond it, or a realm reserved for a particular segment of society. If the circuit itself is the ultimate state, one never reaches a final realm, but instead spends half the time journeying through netherworld realms of darkness and danger, and the other half journeying through celestial realms of light and abundance. Because the journey of the sun is eternal, it is unclear when or how any ultimate destination or state might be attained; and indeed the idea of liberation from the cycle may be irrelevant. The texts do depict the Marsh of Reeds and other locales as desirable goals and *dwelling* places. It is also difficult to imagine the point of the deceased being repeatedly judged on each cycle.

A conceivable solution is that the deceased completed the cycle only once, was judged only once, and depending on the outcome of the judgement (and the ability to overcome dangers) was either annihilated or became divine in the Marsh of Reeds. The Duat would then be a 'gestation' period prior to spiritual rebirth (Beaux 1994: 6).

The multiple states, realms, transformations, and divinizations also suggest an all-encompassing conception involving the omnipresence of the deceased, and amounting to a state of universal totality of the self with the 'Absolute', or 'Ultimate Reality'. The deceased thus ascends in multiple forms to simultaneously dwell in the Marsh of Rushes and the Duat, travel with/as Re on his eternal cycle of rebirth, dwell in the netherworld with/ as Osiris, exist in the firmament as a star, and so on. Just as Re/Osiris/deceased simultaneously gestate in the womb of Nut, Re/deceased journey continually through the Duat and the Akhet, and Osiris/deceased rules in the Duat (cf. Allen 2005: 9). This idea may be supported by the lack of 'logical' narrative progression in the texts. In *Pyr.*, for example, the deceased is instructed to sit on the throne of Osiris before ascent, and undergoes member apotheosis before perils and judgement. The cyclical nature of the Egyptian afterlife may also account for this, though again a narrative sequence is elusive even in that light.

Egyptian religion was quasi-pantheistic in that gods could be inter-associated, both with each other and with concepts and elements; though each deity still had his or her own attributes and did not lose their primary identities (Hornung 1983: 127). The concept also applies to humans, who retain their individuality after death and divine transformation/unification. The fear of annihilation is essentially a fear of becoming

undifferentiated, without selfhood. Thus a lack of *total* unity is desirable, while at the same time divinization and union with the divine are the ultimate goals. This tension and dichotomy between unification and individuality signifies, once again, the reconciliation of dualities characteristic of Egyptian thought. The desire is not to transcend existence itself, but to transcend the earthly state, becoming a spiritualized version of the present self. Because this imposes limits on ‘the propensity to extend and to change’ (ibid. 253), the divinity of *akhs* is not a true omnipresence, omnipotence, or transcendence in the strictest sense. The fact that the spirit becomes multiple divine and transcendent identities, however, points at least to an effective omnipresence, omnipotence, and transcendence of the current reality.

This is not to ignore the evidence that there are different afterlife fates depending on the individual. In addition to divinization and annihilation, some evidently have more servile roles, tending the fields or bringing water to the gods and/or the deceased individual addressed in the texts. There is no clear indication that such positions would be temporary or intermediate. Generally speaking, however, the choice of afterlives was between *non-existence* (annihilation) and *divine existence* – returning ‘to the all-encompassing One from which we emerged at birth’ (Assmann 2001: 182). In the Middle Kingdom text *The Man Who Was Weary of Life* (131–49; Simpson 2003: 168), death is compared to recovery from illness, to a return home, and to understanding the unknown.

In summary, despite some uncertainties of language and meaning, it is clear that multiple yet unified experiences are being described. In addition to encounters with/transformations into divine beings, the Egyptian afterlife includes leaving the body in spiritual form and journeying to other realms which are considered the ‘home’ or origin state, an encounter with one’s own corpse leading to the realization of one’s spiritual immortality, entering darkness and emerging into light via descent into and ascent from the Duat, water crossings and ferrymen, interrogations with a stress on the knowledge of the deceased, meeting deceased relatives, judgement or self-judgement based on one’s earthly moral conduct, a panoramic life review, obstacles/barriers and perils with the threat of annihilation, and a cyclical existence of continual rebirth and renewal.

Chapter 5

Sumerian and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia

Introduction

The main sources for the Mesopotamian afterlife are literary texts written in cuneiform script on clay tablets. Much of their content dates to at least 2000 BCE, though references to historical events and people suggest origins of up to three-hundred years earlier. The tablets themselves are mostly from the eighteenth century BCE or later (Black et al. 2004: ix, xlvii).

The characterization of the texts as ‘literary’ does not imply that they were secular, for they are almost invariably concerned with divinities, their actions, and worship; and were thus clearly a source of religious meaning and significance. The contexts for their composition were mainly cultic or courtly, for example for inaugural or celebratory functions (ibid. xlvii).

Most of the relevant extant material is Sumerian, and only a few relevant Akkadian texts meet our criteria. This is mainly due to the fact that even when Akkadian became the dominant language, the use of Sumerian in literary contexts persisted, carrying with it a priestly or sacred authority comparable to Egyptian hieroglyphs or Latin (Dalley 1989: 1). Old Babylonian Akkadian literature is itself largely dependent on Sumerian literature, while incorporating Old Akkadian and Amorite traditions. Culturally speaking, the distinction between Sumerian and Akkadian is not rigid (ibid. 42). Ancient Mesopotamian scholars themselves regarded their culture as bilingual – that is, a single culture sharing two languages (Foster 2005: 81).

Texts dealing with the afterlife which fall outside our date restrictions are largely consistent with those discussed here, primarily giving only additional details about the netherworld (particularly regarding deities and gates).

The Bilgames Texts

The antecedents to the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* are a collection of Sumerian texts in which the hero king (possibly an historical figure) is known as Bilgames. Though originating as far back as 2100 BCE, the texts are mostly known from eighteenth-century BCE scribal copies (George 2003a: 7). Different versions show variation in language and plot, and some parts of the texts are missing (George 2003b: 141).

The Old Babylonian Akkadian version of the *Epic* proper (c.1700 BCE) is consistent with the Sumerian poems, with the important addition of Gilgamesh's journey to the paradisiacal land of Dilmun. The Standard Version does not appear until c.1200 BCE, though it does contain much earlier material,¹ and will be referred to when it serves to fill gaps in what are apparently fragmentary earlier versions of essentially the same narrative section.

One relevant chapter in the SV not paralleled in the Bilgames texts or the OBV is the descent of the god Enkidu into the underworld (Tablet VII). However, it will not be considered here as it contains no significant additions or contradictions to the texts under consideration, and in fact, mirrors parts of the Sumerian *Inana's Descent to the Underworld*.

Bilgames, Enkidu, and the Underworld begins with Enki (god of wisdom and of water, who gave civilization and culture to humans), sailing to the underworld. A storm causes his boat to knock down a tree, which Inana (i.e. principal Sumerian goddess, associated with love and war) replants. After ten years, Inana wishes to make furniture from the tree, though a 'snake, thunderbird, and Demon-maiden' have nested in it. She first asks her brother Utu (sun-god) for help, but he refuses. She then asks Bilgames who agrees, removes the creatures from the tree, and cuts it into timber for Inana (BEU 179).

Bilgames also makes two ‘playthings’ from the wood (likely a ball and mallet). When they fall into the underworld, he sits down at the ‘gates of Ganzer’ (i.e. the underworld entrance) and cries.

Enkidu, his servant, volunteers to go after them. Bilgames warns Enkidu that he must not call attention to himself in the underworld by wearing clean clothes, fine ointments, or sandals; or by hurling throw-sticks, shouting, kissing or beating his wife, or insulting the spirits by holding a ‘cornel wood stick’ (i.e. of the type Nergal, the scimitar-wielding underworld warrior-deity, uses to beat the newly arrived dead [George 2003a: 900]). If Enkidu does any of these things, he risks being detained by underworld beings.

In the underworld, the mother of Ninazu (the air-goddess Ninlil) weeps disconsolately, mourning for her son. Ninazu is the earliest known underworld deity (Lambert 1980: 60), associated with spring rain and ritual bathing (Katz 2003: 176), and described in a temple hymn as playing a musical instrument and singing sweetly (*ETCSL* t.4.80.1). Ninlil is naked and her skin shines; her ‘fingernails she wields like a rake’, and she pulls her hair out ‘like leeks’.

Meanwhile, Enkidu does precisely as Bilgames had instructed him *not* to do, and is captured (*BEU* 183–4). After seven days, Bilgames seeks help from Enlil, (father-deity, and husband of Ninlil), telling him that Enkidu was not taken by the underworld deities Namtar, Asag, or Nergal, nor by ‘Nergal’s pitiless sheriff’, but by the underworld itself. The distinction here is likely that Enkidu did not die, but descended willingly. When Enlil refuses to help, Bilgames asks Nanna (moon god) who also refuses.

Finally, Enki agrees to help, instructing Utu to ‘open a hole in the underworld’ and to retrieve Enkidu ‘by means of [Utu’s] phantom’. The sun (or its ‘phantom’) thus sets into the underworld and rises with Enkidu back to the earth’s surface. Elsewhere, Utu is described as the father of the underworld, and ‘the judge who searches out verdicts for the gods, with a lapis-lazuli beard, rising from the horizon into the holy heavens’ (*LAS* 223; 1.1.3). He was conceived of as ascending on a chariot into the heavens, then descending into the horizon (Black et al. 2004: 126).

Upon his return, Bilgames pleads with Enkidu to describe the underworld to him. Enkidu reveals how the man with one son weeps because of the loss of his home. The man with two sits on bricks and eats bread. The man with three drinks water from a skin on his saddle, while

the man with four rejoices 'like a man who has four donkeys'. The man with five is allowed entry into the palace, 'like a fine scribe'. The man with six has a joyous heart 'like a man with ploughs in harness'. The man with seven sits on a throne with the gods and hears proceedings/judgements. Those with no heir eat bread like bricks. Eunuchs sit uselessly in a corner, and childless women are considered as worthless as a broken or defective pot. They are cast aside and no one will have sex with them. As for young men who never undressed their wives, 'you have him finish a hand-worked rope, he weeps over it'; while the woman who never undressed her husband, similarly weeps over a reed mat. The leper twitches and is eaten by worms, or eats 'uprooted grass [and] roots for water', ostracized from the underworld city.

The man who died in battle has his head cradled by his parents, while his wife weeps. Those without funerary offerings eat crumbs and table scraps. The stillborn 'play at a table of gold and silver, laden with honey and ghee'. The man who died an early death lies 'on the bed of the gods'. The man who was burned to death rises to the sky: 'his ghost was not there, his smoke went up to the heavens'.

Those who were eaten by lions lament at the loss of their hand and foot. The man who has drowned or who suffered from pellagra 'twitches like an ox as the maggots consume him'. Disrespecting parents leads to constant thirst and only minute rations of water. If a man is cursed by his parents, he is 'deprived of an heir, his ghost still roams'. Blasphemers and cheaters of gods are denied water, while others are given only dirty water to drink (*BEU* 186–8; George 2003b: 189–90).

The passage does much to refute the generally accepted scholarly notion of a gloomy afterlife for everyone (see 'Summary and Conclusions' of this chapter), demonstrating a range of possible fates based on one's earthly behaviour, reflecting social hierarchies: rest and good cheer, a city with palaces, where individuals might eat, drink, have sex and dwell with the gods, or suffer in various ways.

Katz (2003: 199) argues that *BEU* is actually saying the opposite of what it appears to say, that is, that the afterlife is really nothing but gloom. She bases her argument on the fact that when Enkidu is trying to help reconcile Bilgames to mortality, he describes the fate of the corpse and says it will make Bilgames cry. This does not, however, acknowledge a distinction between the fate of the corpse and that of the spirit: while the

corpse will rot, the spirit has multiple possibilities depending on individual conduct – as Enkidu relates. Enkidu is thus helping Bilgames to accept his *physical mortality* by revealing to him the secret of *spiritual immortality*.

The Death of Bilgames sees the hero falling ill, ‘lying down, never to rise again’. He is seized by Namtar, the footless and handless plague deity and minister to the queen of the underworld, Ereshkigala, who decrees the fates of the deceased.

Bilgames has a death-bed vision sent by Enki in which he meets the gods at their assembly to discuss his destiny. Because he is two-thirds god and one-third man, they must decide whether his fate is to be divine or human. They review his career, his heroic exploits, his perpetuation of the proper religious customs and rituals, his foundation of temples, and his journey to the world’s end to obtain ancient knowledge from Ziusudra (the hero of the Sumerian flood myth, granted immortality by the gods).

Bilgames is instructed not to descend to the underworld ‘with heart knotted [in anger]. Let it be undone before Utu’. He goes before the Anuna (group of deities) to the ‘funerary banquet’ in the Great City where priests and priestesses dwell. There he is greeted by his parents, grandparents, and siblings; as well as kings, governors, and military commanders. They tell him not to despair, for he himself ‘will number among the Anuna gods’.

Enki decrees that Bilgames must dwell in the netherworld; but that he will be made a lesser god: a ‘governor’ who will ‘pass judgement’ and ‘render verdicts’ which ‘will be as weighty as Ningishzida (god of snakes, the roots of trees, and the dawn) and Dumuzid (vegetation deity)’.² Elsewhere Bilgames is referred to as ‘ruler’ and even ‘king’ of the netherworld (*ETCSL* c.5.5.2; *DU*), and as Nergal’s little brother (*ETCSL* t.5.7.3). Enlil tells Bilgames that he will be reunited with Enkidu as well as his family.

Although the gods vowed that after Ziusudra humans should not be immortal, the fact that they make Bilgames a divine judge suggests that by ‘immortal’ they mean eternal life *in the body on earth* as opposed to existence in spiritual form following physical death, namely ‘in the form of a ghost, dead in the underworld’. The text states, ‘The Dream God Sissig, son of Utu, shall provide light for him in the netherworld, the place of darkness’, and Bilgames returns to his earthly body after a six-day absence. He arranges his tomb, equipping it with his entire harem and

entourage (sacrificed so that they may accompany him to the underworld³), and gifts for the netherworld priests and deities (George 2003b: 197ff.).

In the OBV, Gilgamesh seeks Utnapishtim ('he found life' [Foster 2001: 228]; the Babylonian Ziusudra) in Dilmun, hoping to learn from him the secret of immortality. Gilgamesh travels around mountains and along 'the hidden road where the sun rises'. The road is 'hidden' because it leads beneath the earth at night, implying that Gilgamesh travels through the underworld.⁴ The mountains reach to the heavens above and the underworld below. The Sumerian word *Kur* meant both 'netherworld'⁵ and 'mountains', and in a temple hymn the underworld is described as a 'primeval place, deep mountain founded in an artful fashion, shrine, terrifying place lying in a pasture, a dread whose lofty ways none can fathom.... your exterior is raised up ... your interior is where the sun rises' (*ETCSL* t.4.80.1; cf. 'Ershemma of Ninhursaga', Katz 2003: 19). In the SV, Gilgamesh encounters an awe-inspiring, terrifying gate, and is interrogated by the Scorpion People, who guard the sun's gates at both horizons (George 2003a: 493).

In the OBV, Gilgamesh asks Shamash (Babylonian sun god) if the nether-world is a place of rest, adding either 'I have been asleep all these years' (Foster 2001: 67) or 'I shall lie asleep down all the years', and continuing 'but now let my eyes look on the sun so I am sated with light. The darkness is hidden [or 'is the darkness far?'], how much light is there? When may a dead man see the rays of the sun?' It should not be assumed that these are rhetorical questions (George 2003a: 283) intended to characterize the afterlife as a realm of sleep and darkness. Gilgamesh may genuinely be seeking answers, a notion supported by his questions to Enkidu about the underworld in *BEU*, and his general preoccupation with immortality. That he addresses these questions to the sun-god before entering the mountain further demonstrates that he is indeed embarking on a solar/underworld journey.

The ferryman, Sursunabu, agrees to take Gilgamesh across the ocean to Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh first smashes the 'Stone Ones', which impedes their crossing for they 'must not touch the Waters of Death' (the underworld waters which lead to the cosmic realm of the god Ea [ibid. 500–1], the Babylonian Enki). Gilgamesh cuts punting poles for the ferryman (ibid. 275, 281), though the OBV text is broken here. As known

from *DB* however, Bilgames succeeded in reaching Ziusudra – and therefore Dilmun. Dilmun is described elsewhere as a ‘pristine’ land where animals do not kill or steal food from humans; a place of silence, light, peace, fresh water, and fields abounding in grain; without disease, old age, or darkness (*ETCSL* t.1.1.1).

In the *SV*, after entering the mountain Gilgamesh outruns the sun and emerges before it into the bright light of a jewelled garden. This has been interpreted by Parpola (1993: 192–3) as symbolizing the attainment of ‘ultimate wisdom’, with the *Epic* as a whole being ‘a mystical path of spiritual growth culminating in the acquisition of superior esoteric knowledge’. Foster (2001: xxi) has also noted that a main theme of *Gilgamesh* is the acquisition of knowledge through netherworld experiences. When he reaches Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh is washed and given new clothes, symbolizing his transformation (George 2003a: 523). Ursanabi is dismissed from his duties by Utnapishtim for ferrying Gilgamesh.⁶

Utnapishtim reveals to Gilgamesh divine secrets and mysteries, particularly concerning the plant of rejuvenation. Gilgamesh finds the plant in the cosmic/underworld waters, though later it is taken from him by a snake which sheds its skin as it slithers away, symbolic of rebirth.

It is important to clarify that Bilgames failed only in seeking *physical* immortality in this life, though he succeed in gaining *spiritual* immortality in the afterlife. This is, in fact, the secret of the afterlife as revealed by Enkidu in *BEU*; and the meaning of the Prologue to the *SV* when it states that Gilgamesh ‘saw what was secret and revealed what was hidden’ (cf. Parpola 1993: 195).

Inana’s Descent to the Underworld and Other Dumuzid Texts

This text partly serves to explain the circuit of Venus, with which Inana was associated (Katz 2003: 96–7). Inana wishes to conquer the underworld. Dressing in fine clothes and adorning herself with jewellery and cosmetics, she takes the seven *Me* with her (paralleled or represented by each adornment and item of clothing). *Me* is the concept of divine law, and the power by which it is maintained. Before descending, she instructs

her minister, Ninshubura, to perform mourning rituals for her; and to ask her father Enlil to keep her from being 'killed in the underworld'. If Enlil will not help, Ninshubura should try Nanna, then Enki, precisely as in *BEU*.

Arriving at 'the palace Ganzer', Inana belligerently pushes the gates and shouts for Neti, the gatekeeper, saying: 'I am all alone and I want to come in.' Neti asks, 'Who are you?', and Inana replies, 'I am Inana going to the east'. Neti asks why she wishes to go to the place from which no one returns, and Inana says that she wishes to attend the funeral of her brother-in-law, Gudgalana. Neti goes to consult Ereshkigala, Inana's sister.

In response, Ereshkigala (described as Ninlil is in *BEU*) 'slapped the side of her thigh, bit her lip', and instructed Neti to bolt the seven gates of the underworld – but to let 'each door of the palace Ganzer be opened separately'. Inana will be allowed into the palace, but she cannot escape the underworld as the gates lock behind her. At each gate an article of her clothing or other adornment is removed from her, including her lapis lazuli 'measuring rod and measuring line', and her 'garment of ladyship'. Each time she asks, 'What is this?', and each time Neti replies that she must not question 'the rites of the underworld', and be content that its 'divine power ... has been fulfilled'. Undressing the goddess of love also has a definite sexual/fertility element, associating the underworld with rebirth.

Inana removes Ereshkigala from her throne and sits upon it herself. This angers the seven Anuna judges who shout at her, judge her, and find her guilty. As punishment they turn her into a corpse which they hang on a hook.

After three days and nights, Ninshubura carries out Inana's instructions. Both Enlil and Nanna refuse to help, both answering that Inana should not have tried to usurp the powers of the underworld, 'for whoever gets them must remain in the underworld. Who, having got to that place, could then expect to come up again?'

Enki, however, agrees to help. From dirt on his fingernails he creates a *galatura* and a *kurngara* (cult singers and dancers in the earthly temple of Inana [Black et al. 2004: 64]) and gives them the 'life-giving plant' and the 'life-giving waters'. As instructed, they search the palace like 'flies' and 'phantoms', and find Ereshkigala, exhausted and dishevelled 'on account of her children'. When they win her favour by commiserating

regarding her complaints about her liver and heart, she offers to grant them a wish. They insist that she swears upon it, which she does, offering them a river full of water, then a field full of grain. They refuse both, and ask instead for Inana's corpse.

Reluctantly, Ereshkigala gives them the corpse which they revive with the life-giving water and plant. When Inana prepares to ascend back to earth, she is stopped by the Anuna who demand a substitute if she is to leave the underworld. Several armed demons (*galla*) surround her on all sides, and escort her back to earth to find one. *Galla* do not eat or drink, make love or have children, and are known for breaking apart families. According to incantation texts, they are native to the netherworld (as opposed to having human origins). 'Galla' was also a term for the earthly city officials responsible for the release of corpses to their families. Their underworld equivalents were characterized as agents of death, deputies, police, executioners, or even 'bandits' (Katz 2003: 126, 149–51).

Inana prevents the demons from taking Ninshubura and other servants and worshippers who remained loyal to her. She then sees Dumuzid, extravagantly dressed, sitting on a throne, clearly not mourning for her. Inana commands the *galla* to take him to the underworld. Dumuzid prays to Utu to assist him in escaping by transforming his 'hands to snake's hands' and his feet 'to snake's feet'. Utu obliges, and Dumuzid is saved (cf. 'Dumuzid's Dream'; 1.4.3).

Filled with regret, Inana is told by a fly⁷ that she will find Dumuzid in a pub. She decides that he and his sister Geshtinana will each spend six months in the underworld. In an incantation text, Geshtinana becomes an underworld scribe, keeping records on the lives and deaths of every human being. She is sometimes associated with Ningishzida's wife Ninazimua, also an underworld scribe (ibid. 174). Ninshubura becomes an underworld minister (*ETCSL* t.4.15.2).

Jacobsen (1976: 62–3) sees the narrative as a combination of three causally linked death-and-rebirth myths. Dumuzid is associated in a fertility context with the grain from which beer is made; and in a descent context to beer being stored underground. 'Geshtinana' means 'the leafy grape vine' – a symbol of abundance and fertility. The connection between grain and grape here is that grain is harvested in the spring, then brewed and stored, while grapes are harvested in the autumn. This corresponds to the six alternating months each sibling spends in the underworld. It is then

Enki, associated with spring waters, who causes the fertility goddess Inana's revival.

Dumuzid and Geshtinana begins with demons encouraging Inana to conquer the netherworld. She instead gives them Dumuzid, and they put his feet, hands, and neck in stocks. 'Copper pins, nails and pokers were raised to his face.' They sharpen their axes, make him stand and sit, strip him naked, do 'evil' to him, and cover 'his face with his own garment'. As in *In.*, Dumuzid prays to Utu for help (to become a 'soaring falcon' as well as part snake), and he ultimately returns to Geshtinana.

Similar is the poem known as 'The most bitter cry', in which Dumuzid falls into a river while being chased in the desert by 'seven evil deputies of the netherworld'. Near an apple tree on the riverbank he is carried into the netherworld, a place where things simultaneously are and *are not*, with 'cattle pens that are no cattle pens' and food and water which are not food and water (ibid. 51). This could indicate insubstantiality or immaterial form, or perhaps a reversal of the earthly order, rather than the netherworld being a vague half-life. In a lamentation text an underworld messenger comes for a woman, 'yet he has not come. He has eyes but he cannot see. He has a mouth but he cannot converse' (Katz 2003: 203).

'In the desert by the early grass' is a collection of ritual laments to Dumuzid and gods associated with him, including Ishtaran with 'bright visage', a snake god associated with borders and justice; Damu, a healing god, associated with spring tree sap, Ninazu, and Ningishzida. Other underworld beings mentioned in the text include Alla ('master of the battle-net'), Lugalshudi ('the constable', 'King who has slipped into the ground' [Jacobsen and Alster 2000: 326], and Ningishzida's deified harp), Lusiranna (associated with clouds and rain), Niminur ('spider' or 'frisky bull'; spouse of Nanshe, the fertility goddess associated with dreams), Dimpikug (Ningishzida's assistant), and Malaka ('king of warriors') (Jacobsen 1987: 59).

Damu, 'the dead anointed one', is taken to the netherworld by demons, blindfolded, restrained, and forbidden to sleep. His mother wishes to follow, believing he will return 'out of the spring grass'. At 'the foot of the mountain' she passes down the 'road of no return ... to him who lies in blood and water, the sleeping lord ... to the traces of kings, to the grange of the anointed ones, the dining hall of the linen-clad ones' (i.e. priests [ibid. 63]) (Katz 2003: 23).

As a disembodied spirit, Damu says he is ‘lying in’ the winds, ‘in the lightnings and in tornadoes’, and therefore his mother cannot follow. She would also be unable to consume the netherworld food and drink because it is bad, even though he consumes it.

Somehow unaware that he is dead, Damu meets spirits of the dead on the netherworld road. A ghost child tells Damu that he/she is lost, and the spirit of a singer promises to stay with the child, adding: ‘As for me, setting up a spirit harp in the wind, what matters it? I am one versed in understanding spirits, in dirges, what matters [now] my understanding?’

Damu asks the spirits to take a message to his mother, hoping that she will rescue him by bribing the netherworld ranger. The ghosts cannot make the living hear them, though Damu does somehow manage to communicate to his mother, ‘dig up my blood for me, the which you are to chop up’. She is then to take the pieces to Damu’s sister, a leech called Amashilama who does not eat fish or onions. Amashilama is to brew beer from the pieces of congealed blood, which Damu is to drink, thus incorporating his own body within himself in order to be restored to life.

Somehow Damu only realizes he is dead when he is told that his mother and sister are looking for him and preparing the beer in order to revive him, but that he cannot speak to them. He says he is not in the grass which will grow for his mother again, nor in the waters which will rise. His mother blesses him, addressing her blessing ‘toward the foundations of heaven, toward the foundations of earth’.

Amashilama dies and joins Damu in the netherworld, remarking that his face has become ‘luxuriant’ and ‘lush’. She tells Damu, ‘the day that dawns for you, will also dawn for me; the day you see, I shall also see’ (Jacobsen 1987: 51ff.), demonstrating that there is daytime in the netherworld (inverse to the earthly day-night cycle [Heimpel 1986: 148]).

Ningishzida’s Journey to the Netherworld

Though an underworld deity, Ningishzida is described in a temple hymn as ‘the prince who stretches out his pure hand, the holy one of heaven’ (ETCSL t.4.80.1). In the present text he is associated with Damu and various other underworld deities.

The dying Ningishzida is commanded to ‘arise’ and board the underworld ferry. ‘Arise’ may refer to the spirit rising from the body, or perhaps it was a standard way of calling a crew to set sail (Jacobsen and Alster 2000: 131). Ningishzida protests that he is young and does not want to die.

His sister Amashilama (now a cow deity) laments as he is being taken away on the boat. She prays to go with Ningishzida, who notices her only when a demon calls his attention to her. Ningishzida tries to discourage her, describing the underworld as a place where the river has no water, the fields have no grain, and the sheep have no wool, and therefore one cannot eat, drink, or be clothed. He tells her, ‘I am a field threshed by my demon – you would scream at it. He has put manacles on my hands – you would scream at it. He has put a neck-stock on my neck – you would scream at it.’

After Amashilama makes a failed attempt to bribe the demon with her jewellery, Ningishzida commands the boatmen to wait for her, and rejoices when she boards the boat. There is a lacuna here, though it seems that another deity intervenes and the siblings are saved. Ningishzida is made divine throne-bearer of the netherworld, complete with sceptre, crown, and ‘holy robe of office’. The demon is warned not to raise his hand against Ningishzida, who is now happy and joyful, eating food, drinking wine, bathing, and being welcomed by his throne and bed (Jacobsen and Alster 2000: 334).

Elsewhere, Ningishzida is described as a hero unequalled in heaven, a commander who carries out ‘the underworld’s business’, ‘foremost one, leader of the assembly ... king endowed with awesomeness, sun of the masses’ (t.4.19.1). An incantation to Utu refers to one who is seized by Ningishzida, only then to be allowed to pass (ibid. 331).

The Death of Ur-Namma

This hymn to the founder of the Urim III dynasty (d. 2096 BCE) refers to the underworld as Arali, reached on a ‘desolate’ journey by donkey and chariot. Ur-Namma brings gifts of livestock and luxury goods to the ‘seven chief porters of the underworld’ and to various underworld gods in

their palaces. He is cheered upon his arrival and provided with a banquet. Otherwise, food in the underworld ‘is bitter, the water brackish’. Ur-Namma is given a house, a throne, and ‘all the soldiers who had been killed by weapons and all the men who had been found guilty’. Alongside his brother Bilgames, he becomes an underworld judge.

He is not beyond mourning the loss of his earthly life, missing his family, and wishing he could complete projects he had begun on earth. A somewhat obscure line, ‘after seven days, ten days had passed’, may indicate that time passes faster in the underworld (2.4.1.1; Black et al. 2004: 58–60).

Enlil and Ninlil

When Enlil has sex with Ninlil, ‘the fifty great gods and the seven gods who decide destinies’ deem it to be ‘ritually impure’, have him arrested and taken to the underworld. Ninlil follows, pregnant with Suen (Nanna). At the city gate and at the ‘man-eating’ river of the underworld (Id-kura), Enlil arranges to trade places with the gatekeeper, the guardian of the river, and the ferryman so he can impersonate them when Ninlil arrives, pretending to her each time that he does not know where Enlil is. Ninlil offers to have sex with each man, ignorant of the fact that they are all Enlil. In each disguise, he impregnates her progressively with Nergal, Ninazu, and Enbilulu, ‘inspector of canals’ (*LAS* 103–6; 1.2.1). The narrative thus explains the birth of three underworld deities, as well as the moon god, in a context which associates sex, fertility, and celestial bodies with the afterlife. Elsewhere, Enlil is described as refreshing himself ‘in the deep underworld, the holy chamber’ (*ETCSL* t.4.05.01).

Etana and Other ‘Ascent’ Texts

The heavenly ascent of Etana (who may or may not have been an historical figure) is referred to on the Sumerian king list (*ETCSL* c.2.1.1), and is

depicted on Akkadian cylinder seals as early as c.2390–2249 BCE (Dalley 1989: 189).

An elegy for the deceased requests help from Etana along with various underworld gods, clearly placing him in an afterlife context (*ETCSL* c.5.5.2). The relevance to the deceased of an ascended king could suggest the deceased joining Etana in the heavenly realm; though it could also indicate that Etana descended to the underworld after his ascent. Etana is in the underworld in the SV (VII.202), and is often listed among underworld gods in later incantations (George 2003a: 129).

The earliest Etana narrative dates to the Old Babylonian period, though it attributes authorship to a c.2150–2103 BCE king (Shulgi). The fragmentary text does not preserve the ascent episode, though we know from Assyrian versions (c.1500–600 BCE) that Etana is seeking the ‘plant of birth’ from Ishtar (Babylonian Inana), and is taken to heaven by an eagle. He first experiences a visionary dream of the heavenly realm in which he travels through the gates of various gods to the house of Ishtar. When lions spring at him from beneath a throne, he awakens (Foster 2005: 534; 552ff.). The plant, as well as Etana wishing to ‘disclose concealed things’ (or ‘open up what is hidden’; *ibid.* 538), suggests rebirth and the attainment of knowledge in the spiritual realm (Parpola 1993: 198).

Another reference to ascent occurs in the OB creation myth of *Atrahasis* (‘surpassing wise’ [George 2003a: 510]), wherein Mami (Sumerian Ninhursaga, mother-goddess) contemplates escaping from the ‘abode of grief’ (i.e. earth): ‘Shall I go up to heaven, I would take up my dwelling in a [well-larder] house’ (Foster 2005: 250).

Inana, of course, also ascends, being the Morning Star; and the prominence of her descent myth makes her ascent relevant here. In a Sumerian hymn she is described as ascending to heaven ‘like a warrior ... among youths and heroes’ (*ETCSL* c.2.5.3.1), evidence that ascent was a possibility for at least some segments of society.

There is another reference to ascent in a fragmentary hymn (*ETCSL* t.6.2.3); and in an elegy: ‘May Utu bring forth for you bright light from the netherworld.... May Ninkura [mountain goddess, daughter of Enki and Ninhursaga] stand by you, may she raise you high’ (*ETCSL* t.5.5.3). Those who are burned to death ascend to heaven in *BEU*, which also describes Enkidu’s rescue from the underworld by the ascending sun. Bilgames’

journey in *DB* should also be considered as ascent, since he reaches Dilmun ahead of the rising sun.

Other Miscellaneous Texts

A late third millennium ‘prayer for a dead person pleading to be admitted to the netherworld’ was found in the hand of a corpse (Veldhuis 2003: 1, 4). It expresses hope that the underworld palace will provide ‘clear water to me in the forest where *gur* birds live’. In the underworld ‘a great oven is lighted’, and hopes are expressed for the door of the underworld to remain open and unbolted; for the door’s crossbar to ‘be the Lama [protector deity] at my favorable side that shines brightly on my right shoulder’; and for the gate to be ‘proud’ of the deceased. With Inana in the lead and the deceased’s personal god in the rear, ‘May my gatekeeper bow down, so that I might raise my neck on high!’ (ibid. 2).

Veldhuis (ibid. 3) has gleaned from the text that ‘the dead have to cross a fire in order to reach the netherworld’. This is based on his identification of the palace as *Ganzer*; and the observation that ‘*Ganzer*’ is the same word for ‘flame’ (though spelled differently). Veldhuis further argues that the ‘great oven’ and the request for water attest to extreme heat, and that the forest is ‘inhospitable’ and dangerous to cross. The text, however, may not have been intended to be so ominous. A palace in a forest full of birds is not necessarily a negative place. Birds were associated with souls of the dead at least by the first millennium, and it is conceivable that they have the same symbolism here. The oven may be a symbol of welcoming (i.e. warmth and food), particularly when coupled with the reference to ‘clear water’. Veldhuis’ identification of the palace as *Ganzer*, and his connection between ‘*Ganzer*’ and flame are not verified (the word, in fact, can also mean ‘darkness’ [Sladek 1974: 58]). Finally, it is highly questionable that the deceased would be praying for admittance to the underworld if it were an entirely objectionable place.

In a proverb, the underworld is referred to as ‘the most honoured place’ (*ETCSL* t.6.1.01). An elegy wishes contentment for the deceased (‘may your spirit be pleased, may your heart be at rest’), and for a god to enable him/her to ‘eat fresh food’ (*ETCSL* c.5.5.2). Concern for subsistence and

clean water in the afterlife also occurs in *BEU*, *DU*, *Nin.*, and elsewhere (cf. Katz 2003: 212ff.). The Law Code of Hammurabi curses the spirits of any unjust future rulers to an afterlife without water (Heidel 1949: 192). An axe dedicated to Nergal contains the prayer, ‘may he provide me with clean water in the underworld after my death’ (t.5.7.3), contrasting with his characterization in a hymn as a storm ‘full of furious might ..., an angry sea, inspiring fearsome terror ... a dragon covered with gore, drinking the blood of living creatures’. Nergal has powers to ‘create life’, ‘determine destinies’, ‘render judgements’, ‘to carry off and to bring back’. His ‘terrifying anger smites the wicked ..., single-handed crusher who tortures the disobedient, fearsome terror of the Land ..., giving just verdicts like the noble youth Utu’ (*LAS* 159–61; 2.5.2.1).

Summary and Conclusions

The myth of the Mesopotamian afterlife being universally gloomy and lacking judgement has a long and prestigious pedigree. According to Jacobsen (in Frankfort et al. 1946: 239–40) death in Mesopotamia was seen largely ‘as an almost complete destruction of the personality’. Much more recently, Bottéro (2001: 222) described it as ‘inevitable indefinite drowsiness’, stating that the only basic, unwavering belief throughout Mesopotamian literature ‘is that death put an end to all that is positive, bright, noisy, joyous, active, comforting, and happy in our existence’ (Bottéro 1992: 286). In light of the texts reviewed above, these appear to be over-generalizations which result in references to judgement, and to more positive afterlife descriptions (e.g. rejoicing, banquets, meeting deceased relatives and becoming or dwelling among gods) being overlooked. Thus, Katz (2003: 199) argues that because of the positive afterlife possibilities described in *BEU*, it ‘is not a reliable source’ for our understanding of afterlife conceptions of the period.⁸ Likewise, Cooper (1992: 26) sees the judgement-based afterlife in *BEU* as heterodox, in contrast to the orthodox view of simply ‘gloom’. It may be more productive, however, to view the situation not in terms of normative versus deviant, but in terms of the multiplicity of beliefs and/or possible

fates (cf. Katz 2003: xviii–xix) actually found in the texts (i.e. not exclusively in *BEU*).

It is significant here that the study of Mesopotamian religion is historically rooted in an Old Testament theology background. Because of historical, cultural, linguistic (in the case of Akkadian), and literary connections, scholars have perhaps seen Hebrew and Mesopotamian traditions as bearing more similarities than is actually evident from the existing sources (conforming neatly to J. Z. Smith's critique of comparative studies). This is not to disparage the work of giants upon whose shoulders we stand, but rather to acknowledge that their own historically/culturally-situated characterizations of the Mesopotamian afterlife have impacted scholarship to the present day. The fact is, there is famously precious little on the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible (in contrast to Mesopotamia), and it contains nothing like the texts discussed here.

The case for the Mesopotamian afterlife being non-judgemental and morally neutral has been particularly overstated. Brandon (1967: 55) went so far as to suggest that there is no judgement because there is nothing to be judged – the person disintegrates in an 'irreparable shattering of the psycho-physical organism'. As seen here, however, there is indeed judgement, and the usual fate of the deceased is certainly not annihilation.

Although Bottéro (2001: 109) acknowledged that one's afterlife fate is determined by his/her 'conditions on earth' (as opposed to behaviour) he also claimed that it was almost universally a realm of 'despondency and torpor', with only a few who were marginally better off; that judgement did not involve a logical decision at all, let alone one based upon morality; and that one's afterlife fate is a matter of 'chance' (Bottéro 1992: 278–9). First, it is possible that one's conditions and social status *in life* are determined by the gods according to one's behaviour, amounting to a form of 'pre-mortem' judgement which has consequences in the afterlife. This was the case in Mesoamerica (see the section 'Mexico and Aztec Poetry and Songs' in [Chapter 8](#)), despite (similarly) concurrent underworld judgement. Accepting for the moment that technically 'there is no indication that it was believed that a just man would enjoy a better afterlife than his less virtuous neighbour' (Crawford 1991: 122), it may rather have been a case of what is *right* and *proper* – what upholds the principles of *Me* – as opposed to 'virtuous' or 'just'. It is right and proper to have many children to perpetuate the human race, for example, though

this is not necessarily ‘just’. Furthermore, ‘justice’ is a culturally-relative concept. From the Mesopotamian perspective, it may have been ‘just’ for the diseased to continue to suffer in the afterlife, that is, if they ‘deserved’ to be diseased in the first place.

Second, references to ‘just verdicts’ and the ‘wicked’ being ‘smited’ should not be ignored. The life review in *DB* also clearly demonstrates that Bilgames’ good deeds and righteous behaviour are being evaluated by the gods in the process of deciding his afterlife fate. Whether heroic exploits, piety, and building temples to the gods can be called ‘just’ is debatable, though these things certainly reflect the Mesopotamian ideal of character and virtue. Katz (2003: 183, 191) acknowledges that, at least in *BEU*, one’s ‘previous conduct during life’ was linked with afterlife judgement. Similarly, the soldiers and guilty men in *DU* were considered in a different category from others, and received a correspondingly different afterlife fate.

In addition to the underworld judges mentioned above (the Anuna, Nergal, Bilgames, Utu, Ur-Namma, and even the man with seven sons in *BEU*), the moon-god Nanna carried out judgement and decided ‘sublime verdicts’ in the underworld, as did Enki and his wife Ninki who ‘determine fates’ (*ETCSL* t.2.5.4.13; Jacobsen 1987: 122–3). Judgement-related bureaucracy is attested by Hendursaga, ‘accountant ... [and] chief constable of the dead people who are brought to the underworld’ (*ETCSL* t.4.06.1); as well as by references to throne-bearers, sheriffs, gatekeepers, porters, scribes, ferrymen, and so on. The existence of this complex bureaucratic infrastructure is obviously explicable only if there is a need to judge and process individuals who arrive in the underworld after death. It is inconceivable that judgement could be such a clear feature of the realm of the dead, but that the dead themselves are not judged.⁹

Further evidence of afterlife judgement may be found in the ‘Hymn to Nungal’ (prison deity, daughter of Ereshkigala, and self-proclaimed underworld ruler). While it primarily concerns a prison, or ‘prison-temple’ (Black et al. 2004: 339), it uses the underworld as a metaphor, constituting a warning of possible parallel fates in this life and the next. This is most forceful with the idea of judgement, wherein the prison is described as ‘underworld, mountain where Utu rises ... House, which chooses the righteous and the wicked.... The gods of heaven and earth bow down before its place where judgements are made’. The metaphor is further

strengthened by the reference to the underworld as a prison in *Des.* (Jacobsen 1987: 82; *LAS* 339–42; 4.28.1).

In an elegy, the deceased is informed that ‘Utu, the great lord of the netherworld, after turning the dark places to light, will judge your case. May Nanna decree your fate on the day of sleep’. The subsequent prayer asks that the goddess (Ereshkigala?) will show pity (*ETCSL* c.5.5.2). In the ‘Prayer-letter to Enki’, a man in the netherworld asks the god for pity, adding ‘After you will turn my dark place into light I shall sit in your gate of “Guilt-Absolved” and sing your praise’ (Katz 2003: 224).

Any remaining doubt that there was individual judgement based on earthly behaviour is dispelled by this passage in which a youth prays to his god:

... after you have made me know my sins, at the city’s(?) gate I would declare them, ones forgotten and ones visible. I ... will declare my sins before you. In the assembly may tears(?) rain like drizzle.... May your holy heart(?) have mercy and compassion for me.... May your heart, an awe-inspiring wave, be restored towards me. (*ETCSL* t.5.2.4)

Judgement obviously implies an afterlife fate based upon the outcome of that judgement, and a diversity of possible fates: if there was only one gloomy experience for all, judgement would be pointless (cf. Kramer 1960: 66). Burial evidence demonstrates that the degree of comfort one may expect in the afterlife is proportionate to the quality and quantity of their grave goods (Crawford 1991: 123), reinforcing the fact that the afterlife was not the same gloomy place for everyone.

Some positive afterlife possibilities are made explicit in *BEU*, *DU*, ‘ascent’ references, and miscellaneous other texts where *hopes* for a positive afterlife indicate *beliefs* in one. The lapis lazuli mountain in *In.* is not an indicator of gloom, nor are references to the underworld and its deities being radiant with light. In a hymn to Nergal, the underworld is described as having an ‘awesome radiance’ (t.2.4.2.21). Enki in his capacity of underworld judge is described as a being of light, illuminating darkness and radiating beauty and joy (Jacobsen 1987: 122–3). Lugalera (a shepherd aspect of Dumuzid) is described as emitting ‘a bright light’ to the underworld princes as they bow before him (t.2.4.5.2).

In contrast, there are actually only three references to netherworld darkness in the texts, and two of these also refer to that darkness being illuminated by Utu or Sissig (Katz 2003: 223f.). In the OB Sunset Prayer, Utu is described as ‘judge of those above and below’, emerging in the morning at the ‘level place’, interpreted as where judgement took place (Heimpel 1986: 146). Together with an elegy emphasizing his role as underworld judge (c.5.5.2), a connection is clear between ‘the judging of a dead individual with the bringing of light to the netherworld’ (ibid. 148), and between divine light and the process of judgement. After judgement, the sun would continue its progress back to the heavens, leaving the underworld once again in darkness (ibid. 149), meaning that half the time it was illuminated.

Spronk (1986: 99) argues that the Mesopotamian ideal would have been to become divine and dwell forever with the sun god (e.g. SV III.iv.47), though most were resigned to a gloomy fate. The exceptions of Ziusudra and Etana show that a beatific afterlife was at least a possibility, however remote. Heimpel (1986: 140) has shown that the various references to ‘the doors, bolts, keys, gates and gateways of heaven refer to the points of entry to and exit from the invisible world below the horizons’, that is, the underworld, suggesting multiple experiences/transitions/realms. There has been some debate over the notion of Dilmun as a paradisiacal realm, particularly as this was the name for Bahrain. However, earthly and otherworldly places sometimes had the same name, so that there was likely a heavenly *and* an earthly Dilmun (Spronk 1986: 118). Likewise, a name for the netherworld, Arali, was also the name for the desert bordering Urug, known as the place of Dumuzid’s death (Dalley 1989: 318).

Bottéro (2001: 106, 107) argued that Mesopotamian afterlife beliefs were based on dreams, and are thus ‘contradictory, like everything else that comes out of the imagination alone’. They were, he alleged, illogical, ‘confused’, vague, and ‘full of inconsistencies and variable or contradictory elements’ (ibid. 109, 274; cf. Roux 1964: 98). He even went so far as to claim that the Mesopotamians were incapable of thinking in abstract terms (Bottéro 1992: 269). Mythologizing earthly ideas into afterlife ideas (e.g. bureaucracy) (Katz 2003: 246), as well as the very concept of non-physical existence in a non-earthly realm, demonstrates that this clearly is not the case. Complexity of imagery and thought do not

necessarily indicate confusion. As with the Egyptian case, rather than Mesopotamian religion being fundamentally flawed, the fault more likely lies in our own inadequate understanding of what are sometimes ambiguous texts (again, perhaps (mis)informed by a shadow of past ethnocentrism). The possibility of multiple (even simultaneous) conceptions, or of ideologies involving concepts such as omnipresence or transcendence (e.g. Damu in *Des.*), is not allowed for by the ‘either/or’ mode of thought characteristic of many scholars. Attempts to systematize the Mesopotamian afterlife have thus inevitably been unsuccessful, appearing to be imposing an unintended order (or order in an unintended way).

Furthermore, to view the texts as inherently defective leads to a reductionist decontextualization which denies their relevance as sources of significant spiritual or religious meaning. Hence Bottéro’s (2001: 37) statement that ‘There was absolutely nothing “mystical” about Mesopotamian religion’ – an extreme supposition which does not seem to be based on a balanced consideration of the evidence. Bottéro’s (1992: 278) interpretation of the stripping of Inana, for example, was simply ‘death takes everything away from us’. This cannot possibly do justice to such a complex and detailed text; and certainly does not elucidate the full meaning it may have held within its cultural context (see [Chapter 9](#) for a possible interpretation).

The death-and-rebirth of the deceased was associated with the cycles of nature, and the descent and ascent of Inana/Venus, Utu/sun, and Nanna/moon. That the natural/cosmological cycle of death-and-rebirth took place in afterlife/underworld contexts suggests that the concept also extended to humans (Kirk 1970: 104–5). If everything in nature and the cosmos dies and is reborn following a descent into the netherworld, surely people must as well.¹⁰ Evers (1995: 98) interprets *In.* as being ‘about the fracturing of the fundamental life-death dichotomy’, and their integration through the constant cycle of death and rebirth. The fact that Inana and Ereshkigala are sisters is of relevance here, for it represents the reconciliation of opposites (heaven and underworld). Inana is said to have the power ‘to turn a man into a woman and a woman into a man’ (*LAS* 91; 2.5.4.11). Ninshubura is sometimes referred to as male and sometimes as female, and is characterized as both heavenly and underworldly. Ningishzida is both throne-bearer of the underworld and ‘holy one in

heaven'. Etana and Gilgamesh are underworld officials despite their heavenly ascent. The cosmic waters of Ea which border paradise are one and the same as the Underworld Waters of Death.

The afterlife experience in the texts is primarily one of *transformation* rather than annihilation or eternal gloom. Damu is transformed after his autophagus act, Ningishzida becomes throne-bearer, Inana a corpse which is then re-animated, Bilgames an underworld judge, and so on. Other kings, including Bilgames' father Lugalbanda, achieved divinization; and the deceased becoming a judge following his/her own judgement also hints at such a state. A reference to Inana as 'the most awesome lady among the Anuna gods' (LAS 263; 2.5.3.1) could hint at self-judgement, for the Anuna are the very gods who judge her. This may extend to humans, who are partly divine to begin with (as is Bilgames, who also becomes an Anuna god), according to the OB *Atrahasis* creation myth. It explains that the spiritual element in humans is actually the flesh of a slaughtered god (Foster 2005: 227), and it is because of this spark of divinity that people live after death in spiritual form (George 2003b: xi). The sign for the Sumerian word for 'soul', *gedim*, is often written identically to the word *utukku*, 'supernatural being'. Names of deceased individuals were sometimes written with the determinative for 'god' (*ilu*) and in the script reserved for gods (Bottéro 1992: 272). While there is thus a distinction between individuals who became spirits and those who became gods, divinization was apparently not quite as restricted as one might gather from the literary texts.¹¹ That some rulers' names were written with the determinative for 'star' may indicate a further distinction, between divinization and a stellar afterlife (Bottéro 2001: 62).

J. Z. Smith (1995) cautions that because Gilgamesh is not entirely human, we cannot extrapolate human experiences from his experiences (cf. Evers 1995: 71). Katz (2003: 113), however, categorizes both Gilgamesh and Etana as 'human' (as opposed to Dumuzid and Inana, for example). Both were purportedly historical and of earthly existence (whether Ningishzida et al. were originally divine or human is unclear). That Bilgames' fate is exceptional is clear when he is told in *DB*: 'Another king there will never be, whose destiny is the same as yours.' However, the divinity or otherwise of these figures is largely irrelevant to the phenomenological approach adopted here – the existence of the conceptions within afterlife/underworld contexts is what is significant,

regardless of to whom they pertain. Furthermore, *DU* and the relevant material in the hymns and elegies do not concern the descents/ascent of gods, but rather the anticipated afterlife experiences of humans. These include travelling through darkness, trials, and obstacles, arriving in a realm of light, meeting a divinity of light who assists in the process of judgement, encounters with deceased relatives, an ultimate fate based upon one's earthly experience, and transformation/divinization/transcendence/omnipresence.

Chapter 6

Vedic India

Introduction

The texts under consideration here are the *Rig Veda* (c.1500–1200 BCE), *Krishna Yajur Veda*, *Atharva Veda* (c.900 BCE), *Brahmanas* (c.900–700 BCE), and *Upanishads* (c.700–300 BCE). None focus primarily on the afterlife, though relevant material is embedded within them. All have the status of *shruti*, ‘that which is heard’, that is, by humans, via divine revelation. They are fixed, sacred texts with no variation between editions, in contrast to the Epics (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) and *Puranas*, for example, which are *smirti* – human thoughts in response to *shruti* (O’Flaherty 1988: 1). Such post-Vedic texts show influences from Chinese Buddhism, resulting in far more detailed afterlife descriptions which, as with the later Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts, mainly elaborated upon existing ideas.

The *Rig Veda* is a collection of over a thousand hymns, written to be recited by priests during sacrifices (Panikkar 1977: 31). Generally more concerned with life on earth than with metaphysical speculation, many hymns relate to gods granting health, wealth, longevity, and children (ibid. 229). Despite this, the *RV* does contain descriptions of afterlife experiences. The collection has been described as ‘a staggering web of metaphors’, the very obscurity of which ‘is a symbol of the mystery of the cosmic reality to which it refers’ (Malamoud 1991: 27). As such, it defies a single correct understanding (O’Flaherty 1981: 15–16). Because references to the afterlife are scattered – often consisting of only a few lines here and there – it is not practicable to discuss them systematically

book by book. The dating of particular books is also obscure, making a chronological discussion problematic. What follows is therefore an attempt to reconstruct a general picture of the *RV* afterlife by grouping and summarizing the evidence thematically. This also avoids undue repetition, for despite the variations in date and geographical origins of each book, certain themes recur in various books.

The *Krishna Yajur Veda* is a collection of ritual instruction texts containing ritual verses along with commentary, with a few relevant passages on afterlife fates. The *Atharva Veda* is a later, more ‘popular’ text, though may actually reflect conceptions earlier even than the *RV* (Bodewitz 1999a: 109). The *AV* afterlife descriptions supplement and elaborate upon those in the *RV*, particularly in describing the heavenly realm (Svargaloka).

The *Brahmanas* are priestly expositions on the Vedas, explaining ‘the meaning and purpose of the Vedic ritual’ (O’Flaherty 1985: 10). They present further elaborations as well as clarifications, though the afterlife they portray is largely consistent with the *RV* and the *AV*.

The *Upanishads* (Vedanta, ‘end of the Veda’) represent the culmination of Vedic philosophy (Panikkar 1977: 32). Borman (1989: 99) compares the *Up.* to ‘books of the dead’ in that they were intended to guide the reader through a spiritual evolution which is realized in death. Due to an overall consistency and a wide distribution of passages with similar themes, a strict chronological order for the discussion is impractical.

Unfortunately, most of the Vedas remain untranslated. There is no complete, reliable English translation of the *RV*¹ (O’Flaherty 1981: 12), and this has necessitated a reliance on collections and anthologies. Fortunately, these do include the main relevant hymns (I found only one relevant passage in Griffith [1896] not translated elsewhere). The other texts considered here have mostly been translated in full (*JB* and the *YV* being two exceptions). A close consideration of the secondary literature (especially Bodewitz) has greatly informed my readings.

The Vedas

In the *Rig Veda*, the realm of the dead is located in the ‘spheres above which firmly support the heavens’ (*RV_B* V.15.2). A prayer to go there describes it as a place of fresh waters, where ‘heaven is enclosed’ and where ‘inextinguishable light shines’. It is the realm of the sun and the solar deity Vivasvan, though ruled over by his son Yama, Lord of the Dead. It is located

... in the triple dome, in the third heaven of heaven, where the worlds are made of light.... Where there are desires and longings, at the sun’s zenith, where the dead are fed and satisfied.... Where there are joys and pleasures, gladness and delight, where the desires of desire are fulfilled, there make me immortal. (*RV_A* IX.113.7–11)

The text is addressed to Soma, an intoxicating, life-giving ritual drink: ‘We have drunk Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods’ (*RV_A* VIII.48.3).

A desire is also expressed to go to the realm of Vishnu (all-pervading solar deity), where those ‘who love the gods rejoice’, and where a fountain of immortality (symbolized by honey [O’Flaherty 1981: 227]) is to be found in the god’s ‘highest footstep’ (a reference to Vishnu’s Three Strides which took him to heaven; *RV_A* I.154.5).

A reference to the sun being ‘given by Yama’ has been interpreted as meaning a ‘solar abode’ given to the deceased (I.163.2 [MacDonell 1897: 172]). In Vedic cosmology (e.g. *RV_A* VII.88) the sun emerges from the stone of Varuna (god of *Rta*, moral and cosmic order), which can be equated with Yama’s realm (Yamaloka) (Bodewitz 1994: 37). The deceased thus journeys with the sun through the netherworld on its way to the dawn. This is done via sailing a boat on the primeval ocean. The soul is a microcosm of the sun, an inner light hidden in the heart, just as the sun hides under the earth. Birds are symbolic of both the sun and this inner light (*RV* XXI [Bodewitz 1991: 21]). The celestial and subterranean worlds are associated with each other when the visionary in the text equates the face of Agni (god of fire, light, and the sun) with that of Varuna (*RV* VII.88 [ibid. 19]); and with the father-son relationship of sun-god and netherworld god. Elsewhere it is stated that Soma enables one to see the light of heaven and to find the sun (*RV* IX.104, 14).

Other places to which the deceased can travel are sky, earth, ocean, sun, dawn, ‘the flowing streams of light’, plants, mountains, ‘the whole moving universe’, ‘distances beyond the beyond’, the past and the future (*RV_A* X.58). ‘The life of the dead one wanders as his nature wills’ (*RV_A* I.164.30), and can traverse the spheres (*RV_A* X.18.13). The deceased thus has the power of omnipresence, and has become effectively divinized. This is supported by references to the once-human ancestors becoming gods, and to the deceased creating stars, darkness, and light, and extending heaven and earth. They share Indra’s chariot, and live on offerings made to them by the living (X.15.8–11, 68.11; VIII.48.13 [MacDonell 1897: 170]).

In a hymn that prefigures later afterlife journey narratives, a boy goes to Yamaloka to find his father who went there out of a desire to be with his ancestors. It is a spiritual journey undertaken in a chariot constructed by the boy’s mind,² which can ‘travel in all directions’ (*RV_A* X.135, 1, 3, 7).

Yamaloka is ‘adorned by days, waters and nights’, suggesting that it follows earthly cycles, and is an idealized mirror-image of earth. The souls of sacrificed horses also dwell there. It is described as the ‘pasture that shall not be taken away’, suggesting that one remains there eternally. Yama is described as being ‘adorned with songs’, sitting on the grass beneath a beautiful tree, playing a reed flute, and drinking with the other gods (*RV_A* X.14.1–2, 9, 10.56; X.135.1).

In a cremation ritual hymn (*RV_A* X.16.2–5, 9), the deceased is ‘led by the will of the gods’ on the smoke of his own funerary fire. He/she is told: ‘May your eye go to the sun, your life’s breath to the wind. Go to the sky or to the earth, as is your nature; or go to the waters, if that is your fate. Take roots in the plants with your limbs.’ This passage has been described by Butzenberger (1996: 95) as ‘the doctrine of correspondences’, with the human as microcosm to the macrocosm of the natural world and its cycles. Butzenberger sees this as an indication that the soul does not survive – that ‘the dead person is supposed to dissolve into the macrocosm’ (ibid. 97). It may instead, however, prefigure the Upanishadic doctrines of (a) rebirth; and (b) *atman* (the inner unchanging self) and *brahman* (the Absolute, or ultimate reality), specifically regarding the realization of the individual’s essential oneness with the divine (i.e. *atman* = *brahman*). Indeed, the passage is followed by a prayer for the deceased ‘to reach his own descendents, dressing himself in a life-span ... let him join with a body’;

as well as going to the realms of ‘those who have done good deeds’. The text continues with a prayer for the deceased to join the others ruled over by Yama, and to be purified, possibly suggesting that Yamaloka was an intermediate realm prior to physical rebirth.

The deceased is told to ‘unite with’ Yama and the Fathers (i.e. ancestors) in Svargaloka, and to reap the benefits of the good deeds and sacrifices he/she performed on earth. That one’s afterlife fate was morally determined (at least in the later books) is further evident when the deceased is led to the place where ‘doers of good deeds’ dwell (*RV_B* X.17.4). Those who are generous gain immortality, and stand with the gods in the highest of heaven amidst streams flowing with ghee. All that he/she has given results in abundant return, ‘splendours’, and the sun shining for him/her in Svargaloka (*RV_C* I.125.5–6).

The deceased is instructed to leave ‘behind all imperfections’, return home (i.e. the spiritual home, where dwell ‘the Gods who know you’; *RV_B* X.17.3), and ‘merge with a glorious body’. For three days the deceased ‘flies to the six broad spaces’ and then to Yamaloka. The Fathers are found feasting and drinking Soma with Yama (*RV_A* X.14.3, 7–8, 16), accompanied by Varuna, Matala (Indra’s charioteer), and Birhaspati (divine priest of the gods), along with various ‘families of ancient poets, priests, and singers’ (O’Flaherty 1981: 45).

Each person has his/her own path to the land of the Fathers (Pitaraloka), made by Yama and leading either ‘downward’ or ‘forward into the horizon’. The deceased also travels on water and through straits, on a journey fraught with dangers. To avoid demons (who are warned to keep away), the deceased must take the right path, running past Yama’s pair of four-eyed, brindled dogs, ‘the sons of Sarama’ (the bitch of Indra [O’Flaherty 1981: 45]). They are Yama’s ‘dark messengers’, nostrils flaring and thirsting ‘for the breath of life’ (*RV_A* X.14.9–10). In the next stanza (11–12), however, Yama entrusts the dogs to look after the deceased on the remainder of his/her journey, indicating that they also functioned as guides. Elsewhere, Pushan (a solar deity, ‘the nourisher’) who knows the safest paths to Svargaloka, escorts and protects the deceased (*RV_B* X.17.2–5), as do Agni, and Savitir (solar deity who dispels darkness).

A reference to ‘those who are evil, without order or truth’ having caused ‘a deep place’ to exist (*RV_A* IV.5.5) apparently indicates punishment in a

subterranean hellish place, as does a ‘monstrous abyss’ (*RV_A* I.185). The latter is located ‘below the three earths’ (*RV* X.152.4; 7.104.3–11) – the same location as Naraka, the hellish realm in later texts (Mehr 1996: 136). Indra hurls into the pit those who fail to prepare Soma, and the same fate befalls those who do not perform sacrifices (*RV* IV.25.6; I.121.13 [Bodewitz 2002: 215]). There are prayers against ‘falling into the pit’, for protection from ‘the devouring wolf’, and for the flames of Agni to burn evil-doers ‘to nothingness’ (*RV_B* II.29.6; X.87.14), that is, annihilation. Yama possessing fetters may suggest he also carried out punishments (*RV_A* X.97.16 [Mehr 1996: 108]). Death is described as going downwards and far away, and lying ‘in the lap of Nirrti’ (X.95.15; Bodewitz 2002: 218), a goddess of the earth, death, and destruction who represents the underworld (Bodewitz 1999b: 215).

A list of punishments for demons specifies particular torments (undertaken by Indra and Soma, deification of the drink) for particular transgressions (*RV_A* VII.104). The ‘human’-type sins suggest that the demons are metaphorical for the deceased, and the formula is familiar from later texts³ describing the afterlife punishments of evil or untruthful humans. For example, a Kimidin (a demon who wanders about saying ‘What now?’ [O’Flaherty 1981: 295]), is boiled in a pot for eating meat, hating priests, and possessing the evil eye (2); ‘evil-doers’ are pierced and thrown into an abyss for eternity (3); liars ‘become nothing’ since they ‘talk about nothing’ (8); seducers and corrupters are devoured by a serpent or annihilated (9); others are sent to the abyss, pressed between stones, and crushed (11.17–18). The underworld is referred to once as the ‘house of clay’ (VII.89).

Despite such references, there is some uncertainty regarding the distinctions (if any) between Yamaloka and Svargaloka, the abyss and Pitaraloka. It is possible that this reflects changing conceptions over time (Bodewitz 2002), or that they were all different regions of Yamaloka. The fact that Yamaloka is in the heavens does not necessarily preclude it incorporating an ‘underworld’ (as we have seen in the Egyptian case, underworlds can be conceived of as being in the sky). The netherworld does, however, have a separate sky from that of earth (*RV_A* I.35.6).

The *Krishna Yajur Veda* reveals the various fates of those who do and do not properly conduct rituals (i.e. either following correct procedure or

possessing the required knowledge as to the meanings of the rituals). The one who fails to burn the plants after placing them on the altar to Yama will be bound and dragged by the neck by those plants in the afterlife. The one who knows ‘the seer, the hearer, the reciter, sacrificer is united in the yonder world with what he has sacrificed and bestowed’. ‘Knowing’ here includes knowledge that the ‘seer, the hearer, the reciter’ are Agni, Vayu (elemental god of air and life), and Aditya (solar deity) (KYV III.3.8). There are references to prospering (VII.3.5), to becoming ‘rich in cattle’ (VI.1.8), and to ensuring that one is ‘possessed of a head’ (V.4.11). The one who ‘piles up the fire with itself and with a body; he becomes his body in the yonder world’ (V.4.1). Sacrificed cows go to the sacrificer, with which he/she ‘milks the fire’ (V.7.3). The afterlife realm is described as a place filled with light (II.6.2).

In the *Atharva Veda*, the deceased ascends to the ‘summit’ of the Third Firmament, either on rays of light, passing the ‘great darkness’ (AV_B XI.1.37; IX.5.1); or by being carried by Maruts (storm-gods) (AV_B XVIII.2.21–6). Thirty-three deities act as psychopomps, leading the deceased to the ‘supreme heaven’ where dwell husbands, wives, and sons (AV_{A/B} XII.3.16–17); and a sacrificial goat which ‘smites away the darkness’ precedes the deceased and announces him/her to the Fathers (AV_B X.5.1, 7, 11).

In a passage intended to revive a dying man, the spirit is advised that he should ‘not heed the departed who lead one to the distance’ and to ascend to the light (presumably in this case the light of earth in contrast to the darkness of the afterlife realm). The deceased is in danger of fire from heaven and from lightning. Yama’s dogs are specified as being on the Father’s path, and are named as Shyama and Shabala in a prayer for one to ‘stay safe’ from them, reinforcing their threatening aspect over their helpful one. Another path is described as ‘murky’ and ‘dread-filled’, and the deceased is warned against descending into its ‘lowest darkness’. Those who do risk encountering ‘a fiend with snapping jaws’, ‘the tongue of the demon’, ‘wild-haired women’, and ‘dismal howlers’, and will not return (AV_A VIII.1.3; 1.9–11; 19; 2.10; 24; Bodewitz 2002: 219). Among the terrors of a similar passage (AV_B VIII.1.12) are Malignity, Destruction, flesh-eating Pisachas (ghosts or demons), and ‘the brood of sin’.

Within the abyss is ‘the house infernal’ where Decay, witches, and ‘evil ghosts dwell’ (AV_A II.14.3). The immoral ‘sit in a stream flowing with blood, devouring hair’ or are given to ‘the serpent’ (AV_A V.19.3; AV_B VIII.4.9). There is a prayer against being ‘tied with a rope’ in Yamaloka, and against ‘devourers in the abyss’ who ‘thrive in darkness’ (AV_A VI.118A).

Elsewhere, Yamaloka is ‘where the cow grants all desires’, and appears distinct from Naraka as well as from Svargaloka (Bodewitz 2000: 103). It is explicitly stated that sinners go to the former (AV_A XII.4.36). *Páraloka* is another afterlife term, meaning ‘far away land’ (Bodewitz 2000: 105). *Paravátas* are realms reserved for moral transgressors, and one proceeds to them after encountering Yama (XII.5.64). There are also various references to sinners going to the pit, cave, darkness, abyss, and so on. (e.g. VIII.4 [Bodewitz 1999b: 110–11]). Those who mistreat Brahmins (members of the priestly caste) will not go to Pitaraloka (Bodewitz 1999a: 111).

Svargaloka contains lotus ponds, lakes of ghee, ‘banks of honey, streams of milk and water and curds, and draughts of wine, free-flowing like water’ (AV_A IV.34.5–6). The deceased is reunited with family members and experiences eternal ‘goodness’ (AV_A VI.120.1,3), enjoying the company of semidivine nymphs (Apsarasas), revelling ‘with the soma-drinking Gandharvas’ (heavenly musicians), riding celestial chariots, and flying with wings ‘all across the skies’ (AV_B IV.34.2–4). The roads, buildings, and the ship of the gods are made of gold (AV_B V.4.4–5). An obscure passage states that ‘after sixty autumns’ one ‘may seek unto the treasure-keepers’ (AV_B XII.3.41).

The Brahmanas

In the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (IX.2.3.24; XIII.2.12) Svargaloka is located ‘at the back of the sky’, reached by ascent on ‘the golden light’. The sun’s rays embody immortality, and Death is personified as ‘that person in the yonder orb’ (X.5.2.3), associating it with light and renewal.

A ship which sails to Svargaloka is composed of elements of the *Agnihotra* (fire-sacrifice): its sides are the flames, its steersman the milk-offerer. The ship heads east to Svargaloka, which is also accessible from the north (II.3.3.15–16). A clear distinction is made between Svargaloka and Pitaraloka (6.6.2), which lies southeast in Yamaloka (XII.8.1.19) and is associated with a pit (III.6.1.13–14), demonstrating that it was not exclusively a heavenly realm (Bodewitz 1999b: 218). The ruler of the Fathers is Aditi, goddess of infinity (XIII.4.3.9).

Souls are judged by being weighed in a balance (XI.2.7; XII.9.1). The dead traverse two fires: the good will pass easily and proceed to Pitaraloka or to the sun, though the wicked are burned (I.9.3.2). ‘Whatever food a man consumes in this world ... consumes him in yonder world’ (XII.9.1.8).

In an allegorical narrative thought to contain a description of Naraka (XI [Panikkar 1977: 624]), Varuna sends his son Bhrgu to gain knowledge on a journey to each of the four quarters. In each, Bhrgu sees men dismembering and devouring one another, ‘sitting in silence’, or crying loudly (3–6). The northeast, the direction of Svargaloka, is treated as a fifth region. There a black man with yellow eyes and a stick (probably Yama who is thus described in later texts⁴) stands between an ugly woman and a beautiful woman (7). Varuna states that they symbolize faith, lack of faith (the women), and wrath (the man) (12–13), suggesting a judgement-related meaning.

Elsewhere, the deceased must wrest the heavenly regions ‘from his hateful enemy’ (IX.2.3.29), and is at risk of attack from Asuras and Rakshas (demons and evil spirits, enemies of gods) (I.6.1.11). The Asuras have a heavenly golden castle and magical powers, but cannot speak intelligibly (III.4.4.4; 2.1.23; 4.2.5).

The stars are the lights of righteous men in Svargaloka (VI.5.4.8). The rays of the sun are their souls (I.9.3.11), though are also said to be gods, further associating the dead with the divine. The sun itself is the ‘final goal’ causing one ‘to die again and again in yonder world’, a reference to its cyclical journey. ‘The cloudy ocean ... is the yonder world’ (perhaps the Milky Way⁵) (IX.4.2.5). The especially pious individual is reborn as a golden god who becomes Agni, not requiring food, and ‘complete with offspring and a mate’ (X.1.4.12; VIII.6.1.21).

Death occurs in all three worlds (XIII.3.5.1.d), suggesting that afterlife realms are not eternal, but intermediate phases of death and rebirth. The ignorant and evil ‘come to life when they die again and they become food time after time’ (X.1.4.12), an apparent early reference to reincarnation (cf. Butzenberger 1998).

The *Jaiminiya Brahmana* contains more folkloristic and mythological material than the other Brahmanas (O’Flaherty 1985: 21). It describes how the life-breath ascends to Svargaloka and reports the deceased’s good and evil deeds to the gods. The deceased announces him/herself to the doorkeepers, personifications of the seasons, and asks to be led to ‘immortality’. They take him/her to the sun, who asks ‘Who art thou?’ If the deceased gives his/her name, the sun replies that though the *atman* originated in the sun it will remain with the *atman*, whereupon the seasons run at the deceased ‘from all sides ..., grasp him by his feet and drag him away. Night and Day take possession of his world’. The deceased’s reply should have demonstrated knowledge that the *atman* is one and the same as the sun. This would cause a merging with the sun, and the formation of a ‘second self’ (*JB_A* I.18 [Bodewitz 1973: 52–3]).

The deceased may also be met by one of the seasons, descending on a ray of light, wielding a hammer, and asking, ‘Who art thou, man?’ Those with ‘some (but not perfect) knowledge’ may refuse to reveal their names, and are struck with the hammer. His/her merits split into three parts, which dissipate, go to the seasons, or accompany him/her to Svargaloka, where there is no place for sinners. The merits of others of imperfect knowledge either dissipate in the air, go to Svargaloka, or return to earth with the deceased, apparently in another incarnation, continuing his/her ‘repeated dying’ (I.291; Bodewitz 2002: 215).

When the deceased ‘mystic’ ‘shakes off the body’, he/she travels from the cremation smoke into the night, then to the day, to the ‘half-month of the waning moon to the half-month of the waxing moon’, and then to the month where ‘both the body and the life-spirit come together’. He/she is also asked by the hammer-wielding season, ‘Who art thou, man?’ The correct reply concerns the identification of King Soma with semen and of the self as his offspring, and an understanding of reincarnation (‘you sent me in a man as your agent.... From that man, your agent, you emitted me in a mother’). The seasons give King Soma to the deceased and lead him/her to immortality, ‘... through the twelve- or thirteenfold father,

through this mother, through this faith, through this food, through this truth. Day is my father, night my mother. I am truth ...'. Those who possess this knowledge are not humans, but gods.

Admitted to Svargaloka, the deceased is greeted by 'fathers and grandfathers, swift as thought'. They ask what the deceased has brought them. The reply should be: 'Whatever good I have done, that is yours.' The fathers thus benefit from the good deeds, while the evil deeds go to the deceased's enemies. He/she then 'goes to coexistence in one world with the one that burns here' (the sun). Svargaloka is the place where an individual 'resurges' in a spiritual 'resurrection', a place beyond time in which 'coming into existence is realized in fact' (Bodewitz 1973: 52, 118; *JB_B* I.46).

In the first three realms, transgressors of the *agnihotra* ritual observances (i.e. those who carry them out in ignorance [*JB_B* I.43]) are dismembered and devoured by men who used to be trees, animals, rice, and barley which were not used according to proper ritual. This demonstrates that these realms are partly characterized by a reversal of the earthly order where 'the eaters are eaten' (O'Flaherty 1985: 39; cf. Bodewitz 1973: 100). The victims cry out in agony, except for the barley and rice which scream 'soundlessly'.

In the fourth realm, Faith and Nonfaith guard 'a secret treasure'. These women are likely 'dispensers of good and evil'⁶ (O'Flaherty 1985: 37) for the faithful and nonfaithful, respectively.

In the fifth world are 'two streams flowing on an even level'. One is filled with blood and guarded by 'a naked black man with a club', likely Yama, and as in the *SB* referred to as Wrath (ibid. 39). His nakedness may symbolize fertility, or perhaps rebirth (e.g. the natural or newborn state). The blood in the stream belongs to those who have shed the blood of Brahmins.

The other stream is filled with ghee from which men made of gold fill their golden cups with 'all desires' (*JB_B* I.42). Gold was symbolic of immortality, and the golden men may represent the divinized or blessed deceased (ibid.). The stream is for those with 'true knowledge', faith, and a history of proper ritual participation (*JB_A* I.44). It is unclear if this realm is above, below, or level with the earth (ibid. 42). The fourth and fifth

worlds may have been transitional or intermediate, apparently containing both positive and negative elements (ibid. 37).

In the sixth realm, for the most worthy, are ‘five rivers with blue lotuses and white lotuses, flowing with honey like water’. It is filled with beautiful fragrances, music, and dancing, singing Apsarasas.

The Upanishads

As Olivelle (1999: 4) states, ‘it is futile to try to discover a single doctrine or philosophy’ in the *Upanishads* – texts which were written in different regions over a period of at least 500 years. They do differ from the rest of the Veda, however, being generally concerned more with philosophy than ritual.

After the deceased leaves the body he/she ascends to ‘the highest light (and) emerges in his own true appearance’. Beyond human emotions, this ‘highest person’ wanders this realm of light, ‘laughing, playing and enjoying himself with women, carriages, or relatives, without remembering the appendage that is the body’ (*CU* VIII.12.1–2). The transformation is described as passing ‘from the dark into the multicolored’ and back again. Becoming free of evil, ‘I, the perfected self, cast off the body, the imperfect, and attain the world of brahman’ (8.15).

One’s afterlife destiny is now more specifically dependent upon spiritual enlightenment (prefigured by the requirement of knowledge of the meanings of rituals first encountered in the *KYV*, and of the nature of *atman* in the *JB*). Reincarnation is more explicitly stated as a possibility, as is the goal of *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). The two paths are specified as that of the Fathers (southern) and that of the Gods (northern). The latter, which leads to Svargaloka, is coloured white, blue, orange, green and red, and is travelled by ‘the knower of *brahman*, the doer of good, the man of light’.

Reminiscent of the *JB* (I.46), the enlightened go on the path of the gods, successively from the cremation fire ‘into the day’, ‘the fortnight of the waxing moon’, ‘into the six months when the sun moves north’ (the direction of Svargaloka), then ‘into the year’ (or to the gods), the sun, the moon, and lightning. There the deceased is met by a ‘person who is not

human' (cf. 'second self' in the *JB* I.18; and 'a person consisting of mind') who leads him/her 'to the worlds of *brahman*' from which there is no return (*CU* V.10.1; *BU* VI.2.15–16). The world of Brahma (creator deity), 'the third heaven' (formerly the location of Yamaloka), has two oceans, a Soma-tree, a lake with intoxicating waters, a citadel, a golden palace (*CU* VIII.5.3), and five doorkeepers in the court of *brahman* (*CU* III.13.6).

Those with knowledge of *brahman* also go through 'the sun's door to where that immortal Person is, that immutable self' (*MuU* 1.2.11). Others go to Pitaraloka, now an intermediate realm prior to rebirth. For the spiritually enlightened, the sun is a doorway; for others it is a barrier. The deceased ascends on rays of light accompanied by the universal sound 'OM'. 'No sooner does he think of it than he reaches the sun' (*CU* VIII.6.4–5). Thought is the creative and active force, so that any 'purified' person may obtain any world, fulfil any desire, by the power of the mind alone (*MuU* 3.10). Svargaloka is reached 'by means of the mind, by means of the moon', resulting in 'complete freedom' (*BU* III.1.6). The self is the 'inner controller, the immortal', with power over the elements and over the 'intermediate region' (*BU* III.7.3ff.; cf. *CU* II.24.9).

The one who remains attached to earthly possessions, concerns, and desires, 'goes with his action [i.e. his earthly behaviour (Olivelle 1999: 519)], to that very place to which his mind and character cling' before being reborn.

Those who focus on ritual offerings take the path of the Fathers which leads to the moon, which is *substance* (perhaps referring to physical rebirth).

'Those who seek the self by means of austerity, chastity, faith, knowledge' take the path of the gods to the sun, 'the lifebreath, where they gain immortality and are free from fear' (*PU* I.6–10).

The unenlightened but pious go to 'heavenly worlds', passing from the cremation smoke into the night, 'the fortnight of the waning moon', 'into the six months when the sun moves south', to Pitaraloka, into space, and finally to the moon, referred to here as King Soma (ibid. 528). Echoing the *SB* (X.1.4.12), 'Reaching the moon they become food. There the gods feed on them'. The deceased instructs the moon to continue its cycle, commanding, 'Increase! Decrease!' 'After enjoying sovereign power in the lunar world' (*PU* V.4.4) for 'as long as there is a residue' (i.e. of

merit?), the deceased returns initially by the same path on which he/she arrived, though now passing from space into wind, then a thundercloud which becomes a rain cloud. He/she is then rained upon earth to be reincarnated. The good obtain a positive rebirth; though the unenlightened and impious are reborn as beasts (*BU* VI.2.15–16).

Elsewhere (*BU* III.2.13), the vital energies, senses, and body of the deceased are dissipated among the cremation fire, the air, sun, moon, four quarters, the earth, space, and waters. The spirit goes to the wind, then through subsequent holes in the air, sun, and moon to ‘a world where there are no extremes of heat and cold’, to live ‘for years without end’ (*BU* V.10).

Alternatively (or perhaps additionally), everyone goes to the moon, ‘the door to the heavenly world’. The moon asks the deceased, ‘Who are you?’, and the answer determines liberation or rebirth. Presumably, as with the *JB*, the deceased should not answer with his/her name, for that would show attachment to identity (Bodewitz 1991: 24). Those who are not allowed to pass are rained into an earthy reincarnation. Those whose answer shows a realization of the identification of *atman* with *brahman* (‘I am the season! Who am I? I am you!’) are allowed to pass and achieve immortality (*KsU* I.2).

The deceased then follows the path of Gods to ‘the world of fire’, followed by the worlds of wind, Varuna, Indra, Prajapati (primordial father god), and ultimately *brahman* (I.3). At Lake Ara, the deceased must cross ‘with the mind’, and the ignorant and unenlightened drown. The lake is made of the enemies of liberation, such as wrath and desire (Radhakrishnan 1953: 756). The deceased then reaches ‘the watchmen Muhurta [brief units of time], but they flee from him’. The ‘river of immortality’ (ibid.) Vijara must also be crossed with the mind. The river purifies the deceased of both good and bad deeds which fall upon loved and unloved relatives, respectively. This results in a divine liberation and omnipresence in which the deceased has a life review, and ‘looks down and observes the days and nights, the good and bad deeds, and all the pairs of opposites’. If the deceased also has the knowledge of *brahman*, he/she ‘goes on to *brahman*’ (I.4a).

Various gods and demi-gods are encountered, including Manasi (‘Mind’) and Cakshushi (‘Vision’), symbolizing the beautiful and ugly sides of the soul (Bodewitz 1991: 26). They bring the deceased flowers,

encouraged by Brahma who tells them ‘Run to him with my glory! He has already arrived at the river Vijara! He will never grow old!’ Five-hundred Apsarasas appear, bearing fruits, ointments, garlands, clothing, and perfumes. ‘Decked with the ornaments of *brahman*’ the deceased ‘who has the knowledge of *brahman*, goes on to *brahman*’ (I.4b).

The fragrance of Brahma enters him at the Ilya (‘refreshment’; *ibid.*) tree, and the flavour of Brahma at the plaza Salajya, a place with numerous ‘rivers, lakes, wells, tanks, etc., and gardens inhabited by many heroes’ (*ibid.*). At a palace called Aparajita, the deceased is permeated by Brahma’s radiance. Indra and Prajapati are doorkeepers at the palace hall. They flee from the now divinized deceased, and Vibhu, the glory of Brahma permeates him/her. Finally he/she arrives at the throne Vicaksana (‘reason’; *ibid.*), the parts of which are identified with various divinities, spiritual ideals, and Soma-ritual chants. On the throne sits *brahman*,⁷ and the one who recognizes this also sits upon the throne (Olivelle 1999: 585).

When *brahman* asks the deceased: ‘Who are you?’ (I.5), he/she is to answer: ‘I am the season! I am the offspring of the season. I was born from the womb of space as the semen for the wife, as the radiance of the year, as the *atman* of every being! You are the self of every being. I am who you are.’ Again *brahman* asks ‘Who are you?’ and the deceased replies, ‘The real’, which is described as ‘the full extent of the whole world. And you are this whole world’ (I.6). *Brahman* then asks the means by which the deceased grasps *brahman*’s names, odours, breath, sounds and so on, and the deceased answers accordingly (e.g. ‘with my mind’, ‘with my sense of smell’, etc.). Finally *brahman* says ‘I see that you have truly attained my world. It is yours ...!’ (I.7). Liberation is not described, though the deceased is also identified with Yama, Prajapati, life, and death (IV.15ff.). Yama himself is referred to as the sun, and as son of Prajapati (BU 5.15.1).

In a spiritual journey narrative reminiscent of Bhrgu’s, a young Brahmin called Naciketas goes to Yamaloka (again, sent by his father). He finds that Yama is away, and he is left unattended without food for three days. Upon his return, to compensate for his lapse in hospitality, Yama grants Naciketas three wishes. One is for his father’s kindness, and the other two are for the secrets of the fire-altar and of immortality to be revealed. Paradise is described as a place of merriment where fear, hunger, thirst, sorrow, and old age do not exist (KaU I.12). The sacrificial fire ‘leads to heaven, to the attainment of an endless world’, and ‘lies hidden in the cave

of the heart' (I.14–15). Yama is reluctant to answer Naciketas' questions regarding whether one 'exists' or 'exists not' in death (I.20), and 'What happens at that great transit' (I.29).

That Naciketas chooses knowledge for two of his boons reinforces the connection between death and the attainment of wisdom. Those who know and understand Yama are fortunate (II.7). He explains to Naciketas the concept of *atman* in relation to the afterlife, namely its immortality and continuity (IV.2). Realization of this leads to 'that final step, from which he is not reborn again' (III.8), and only by discerning it can one 'escape the jaws of death' (III.15). 'A certain wise man in search of immortality, turned his sight inward and saw the self within' (IV.1).

The 'person' (*purusha*) is higher than intellect, the soul, the self, and the unmanifest: 'Higher than the person there's nothing at all. That is the goal, that's the highest state' (III.10–11). The person is described as a being of light – 'resembling a smokeless flame' (IV.13; cf. *BU* IV.3.7–8 which adds that leaving the body at death is to leave evil behind). In the form of a goose, the deceased 'dwells in the light' as a god in the sky (V.2). The person 'lies awake within those who sleep; That alone is the Pure! That is *brahman*! That alone is called the Immortal! On it all the worlds rest; Beyond it no one can ever pass' (V.8). Those who do not have this knowledge, and who view reality as 'diverse', will experience death after death (IV.10–11). Some are reincarnated, while 'Others pass into a stationary thing' (V.7). On various states of being the text summarizes: 'As in a mirror, so in the body; As in a dream, so in the father's world; As in water a thing becomes somewhat visible, so in the Gandharva world; Somewhat as in shadows and light, so in *brahman*'s world' (VI.5).

Hellish realms play little role in the *Upanishads*. 'People who worship ignorance' enter 'joyless' regions characterized by 'blind darkness'. The darkness is even worse for those 'who delight in learning' and (paradoxically) 'those who are not learned or wise' (*BU* VI.2.2; IV.4.9–10). In a later *Upanishad*, suicides and the ignorant go to dark 'Demonic' realms (*IU* 3). Still later, dwellers in Yamaloka are referred to as being 'in a state of great fear' (*MaiU* IV.2), suggesting a more negative conception than in earlier texts.

Summary and Conclusions

Notwithstanding the different emphases in the various texts, the Vedic afterlife includes ascent and descent to celestial and subterranean realms by various means; existence in a non-physical form (e.g. light, ‘the mind’ or pure consciousness); encounters with deities and deceased relatives; barriers, obstacles, demons, and other perils; moral/spiritual judgement with subsequent reward or punishment; a world created by the mind alone; and identification of the deceased with various deities, celestial bodies, seasons, natural phenomena, and so on indicating a transcendent, omnipresent state. The continuity of tradition is reflected in the common backdrop of otherworld journey descriptions in the *RV*, *JB*, and *KU*, wherein a father sends his son to the otherworld to gain knowledge and wisdom (O’Flaherty 1985: 42).

The main development from the *SB* to the *Up.* is a stress on enlightenment and wisdom over correct ritual behaviour and generosity. The realization of the nature of *atman* and the knowledge of immortality admits one to Svargaloka over piety or good deeds. This is not to argue that it ceased to be an ethical or morally based system, for the immoral and unethical would not become enlightened to begin with.

The cyclical solar afterlife of the *RV* diminishes in the Brahmanas. Fear of the Abyss, the *RV* ‘primordial chaos’ (*asat*), gives way to a longing for unity of the self with the infinite, and evolves into the more positive idea of *brahman*. The goal became less focused on the realm of the gods and the sun, and more on the realization that the self is *already* a microcosm of the divine. The fear of non-existence was reconciled by the introduction of the concept of *moksha* as the ultimate goal – liberation from rebirth into a state of divine transcendence. The true *RV* hell was thus annihilation (Brown 1941: 80); though there are also numerous threats, perils, demons and the like, demonstrating a variety of possible negative afterlife fates.

The character and function of Yamaloka, an afterlife goal in the *RV*, were apparently transformed in the *Up.* and denigrated to a negative intermediate state for the unenlightened/immoral prior to a low rebirth. A heavenly state was retained as a temporary reward for meritorious behaviour, prior to a high rebirth.

However, one must be careful not to over-emphasize the idea of ‘stages of development’, for most of these concepts were co-existent, as is evident throughout the texts. Other than the introduction of reward through

enlightenment (as opposed to moral and pious behaviour) and punishment through rebirth (as opposed to annihilation), it is less a matter of development than of re-focus. In the former case, there was always a requirement of some form of religious knowledge (e.g. the meanings behind rituals); and there are possible hints at the concept of rebirth even in the *RV*.

To assume a more simplistic evolutionist perspective may lead to serious misunderstandings. As with Egyptian religion, Western scholars often attempt to categorize and divide the Vedic afterlife into a heaven/hell dichotomy which may never have been entirely relevant. Bodewitz (2002: 221) characterized it as a threefold division – Naraka for sinners, Yamaloka for the majority of the populace, and Svargaloka for the lucky few. While there were indeed different realms and different experiences based on piety, knowledge, moral behaviour, and so on, it is not always clear that these worlds were specifically reserved for these particular classes of individuals. This is despite the fact that there is a clear hierarchy of spiritual beings: gods, humans, ancestors, Asuras/enemies/sinners (ibid.).

Butzenberger (1996: 93, *passim*) particularly over-systematizes the Vedic afterlife, attempting to chart chronologically the development of key themes in texts which are notoriously difficult to date, and which demonstrate a multiplicity of beliefs throughout – some of which may never have been entirely discrete. The only clear cases of ‘evolution’ are the doctrines of transmigration (alluded to at least as early as the *SB*) and *moksha*. Butzenberger’s attempt to reconcile the various elements of the Vedic afterlife which seem to him contradictory, results mainly in a categorization of themes and ideas – particularly as he concludes that the most ‘common and popular’ conception was in fact a combination of various apparently conflicting elements (ibid. 97). As with some scholars of Mesopotamian religion, Butzenberger also over-generalizes the *RV* afterlife as a vague, Hades-like shadowy existence (ibid. 64–5),⁸ a conception which is not borne out by the texts. He also shares with certain scholars of Egypt and Mesopotamia an assumption that whatever we do not understand in the texts is the fault of the ancient authors rather than of modern researchers: ‘Accounting for the fact that we are not concerned with refined philosophical systems, we may assume that the problem [i.e.

of which element of the individual goes to Pitaraloka, and which to the gods] was not thought out carefully' (ibid. 84).

Instead, what is clear is that the afterlife was conceived of as a series of intermediate states and experiences. This is evident as far back as the *RV*, with the cyclical solar journey, the 'six broad places', and numerous physical and non-physical realms. In the *SB* (XIII.8.4.7) the deceased rises 'from the darkness, the world of the Fathers, they now indeed go to the light, the sun'; and indeed to all three realms. In the *AV* (XII.5.64) the deceased goes from Yamaloka to *paravat*/hell. There is an explicit series of intermediate states in the *KsU* and *JB*, and even references to 'intermediate regions' in the *PU* and *BU*. In the *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads*, heavenly and hellish realms are merely phases of reward and punishment on the journey to rebirth or liberation, which is beyond description.

The Fathers, Yama, and Varuna are all associated with both the upper and lower realms in the early literature. It was only later that Yama became the fearsome underworld lord he is today. Bodewitz (2002) suggests that Yama actually began as a 'dark' god, and that his character changed 'as a consequence of the discovery of heaven for human beings' in the later portions of the *RV*, then reverted to his original character following the *Upanishads*. The suggestion is speculative, and perhaps unnecessary. It seems more likely that in the early texts Yama had two aspects which were integrated or reconciled in death. He is equated with the sun in the *BU*, and in one of the earliest *Upanishads* (*Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana* IV.5.1–2) the sun becomes Yama in the underworld when it sets, then becomes Soma, then king of the Fathers, before entering the dreams of humans (ibid.).

Such integration/transformation/reconciliation is reflected in the afterlife experience of the microcosmic counterpart to the divine – the *atman* (at least of the enlightened/moral individual). 'The One' is an all-encompassing immortal principle in the Vedas. It is the culmination of the deities, the elements, the celestial bodies (*RV_B* I.164; 8.58 etc.), and the *atman* (*Taittiriya Aranyaka* III.11.1; Panikkar 1977: 660). Equating the One with the *atman* prefigures the *Upanishadic* equation of *atman* with *brahman*, of microcosm with macrocosm (Borman 1989: 91). 'God' is thus not the Other, but the One, the Self. The theme of the reconciliation of opposites is recurring, as has been seen above with deities and realms

being associated with their apparent opposites. Thus, two words for heaven, *Paraloká* and *Asáuloká*, actually refer to underworlds in the *JB*, perhaps even hells (I.42; Bodewitz 2000: 103).

Chapter 7

Pre-Buddhist China

Introduction

Afterlife conceptions are found in the texts of various Pre-Buddhist Chinese traditions, including ancestor-based local religions, Confucianism, Daoism, and poems which do not correspond neatly to any of these streams. These traditions are not discrete, often mixing elements, so that it can be difficult to distinguish the origins of a particular shared belief. Even drawing a line between ‘Confucianism’ and ‘Daoism’ as distinct schools of thought is problematic – particularly during these early periods. The former was also closely tied to the early ancestor-based traditions, and the afterlife as described in the Confucian texts may thus reflect their beliefs.¹ Yü (1987: 363) refers to later Daoist religion alone as ‘a syncretism of all the indigenous religious beliefs and practices at the popular level’. Generally speaking, however, Daoism focused on spiritual and philosophical matters from its beginnings, while Confucianism was largely concerned with social and moral issues.

The ‘Confucian’ Classics and related works were products of a long evolution, with much of the material actually predating Confucius by a minimum of a thousand years (Paper 1995: 7). They stem largely from a rationalist mindset, concerned primarily with earthly propriety, ritual, and moral behaviour. Confucius himself saw little point in metaphysical speculation when we know so little about this life (e.g. *Analects* XI.11 [Chan 1963: 36]). Thus, Xunzi (c.312 BCE) could discuss at length funerary rites and the nature of Tien (god, the unifying force of order in the universe; usually translated as ‘heaven’²) without once mentioning

afterlife conceptions (Watson 1963: 96–111). While there is evidence of belief in ancestors surviving bodily death (e.g. in the *Shujing* [*Book of Documents*]³), their postmortem experiences and the realms they inhabit are scarcely discussed. Nevertheless, relevant material can be found scattered among the *Shijing* (*Book of Poetry*), the *Li ji* (*Book of Rites*), the *Zuo Zhuan* (Zuo's commentaries on the *Chunqiu*, *Annals of Spring and Autumn*), and others.

The early Daoist poetical and literary works such as the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainanzi* (*Book of the Prince of Huainan*), as well as the unclassifiable *Chu ci* (*Songs of the South*) are of a more overtly metaphysical character, often being rooted in shamanism. The *Shanhaijing* (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*; 3rd century BCE) is a largely mythological geographical guide to China and other realms (including the afterlife).

Finally, funerary documents of the Han period (221 BCE–220 CE) were intended to guide the deceased on his/her afterlife experiences.

According to Yü (1987: 382) 'the Chinese conception of the afterlife did not become fully developed until the Han period'. Similarly, Needham (1974: 81) wrote that the Shang had 'very little idea' of any possible afterlife state. Both assertions are arguments from silence, based on a lack of textual evidence. It well may be that there were 'fully developed' pre-Han afterlife conceptions, and that relevant texts either do not survive, or were never written. The small amount of relevant information found on Shang oracle bones suggests afterlife beliefs consistent with those of later times. There is little indication of differing beliefs based on social hierarchy, though the Han material appears to be of a more 'popular' nature (Poo 1998: 4, 16).

The move towards Buddhism in China began between the first and third centuries CE,⁴ roughly corresponding with the end of the Han period. While this would be a convenient demarcation point, the dating of many texts is notoriously problematic. While parts of the *Taipingjing*, for example, may date to the second century CE (Yü 1987: 383, n.47), most scholars believe it clearly demonstrates Buddhist influence.⁵ For these reasons, only texts before the first century CE will be considered here (though again, the dates of many texts remain obscure). While the core chapters of *Zh* are considered here, others which contain relevant descriptions (e.g. Books XII and XVII of the third and fourth century CE)

fall outside our time restriction. They are, in any case, highly reminiscent of material in *Songs of the South*.

Although most relevant material has been reliably translated, I have occasionally had to rely partly or entirely on excerpts found in secondary sources (particularly for *Hnz*, which has not been translated in a complete edition).

Shang Inscriptions and the Confucian Classics

The earliest Chinese textual references to the afterlife appear on Shang period oracle bones (c.1766–1123/1046 BCE). They mention the ascent of the souls of kings to a heavenly realm where they join the ‘Lord-on-High’ (Ching 1993: 19). The world of the ancestors appears to be the same as that of the gods (Poo 1998: 28). Shang documents also refer to feeding the ancestors with offerings, revealing a concern with proper nourishment in the afterlife (Yü 1987: 378).

It is not until at least three hundred years later that we find more detailed descriptions, during a time of religious syncretism after the Zhou dynasty (1122–249 BCE) conquered the Shang (Ching 1993: 34).

The *Shijing* (c.800–600 BCE) describes spirits of the dead as ‘very bright, very glorious’. The spirit of King Wen, founder of the dynasty, ‘shines in heaven’ in a ‘glittering light’. Having attained divine or semi-divine immortality, he ‘ascends and descends; on God’s left hand, on His right’ (Song 214). Heaven is said to be the home state to which the individual returns, for it ‘gives birth to the multitudes of the people’ (Song 242). It is a place of joy, ‘where we shall have our place ..., where no sad songs are sung’ (Song 276), and where the Milky Way is a flowing river (Song 284). ‘Heaven’ was synonymous with Tien from this period, and perhaps earlier (ibid. 34). In an apparent reference to judgement, Heaven is referred to as ‘that happy kingdom where we shall get our due’ (Song 276); though slanderers are thrown ‘to Him of the north’ (Yo Pei). If he will not accept them, they are thrown to the Lord of Heaven (Shangdi) (Song 279). Erkes (1940: 188) suggested that Yo Pei was both ruler of the realm of the dead and an astral deity (the polar star, specifically [Waley 1954: 315]). Probably a southern deity originally, his northern counterpart

was ‘the Lord (or ‘the Old One’) of earth’. In earlier times, Shangdi was a chthonic fertility deity associated with the dog (ibid. 191).

In the *Shujing* (*Book of Documents* relating to early Chinese history, parts of which originate at least as far back as the sixth century BCE), ancestors are ‘kings in heaven’ (Legge 1879: 153). Paradise is located ‘in the eastern sea’, though it is also said to be in the west (Poo 1998: 160).

A reference to morally determined fates occurs in the *Chunqiu* (a collection of moralistic historical narratives covering the period of 721–481 BCE). It states that Shangdi ‘pacified the good and humane ones in death, but he suppressed the inhuman ones’ (1.18a; Erkes 1940: 188–9).

The *Zuo Zhuan* (compiled c.389 BCE) contains the first reference to the subterranean realm called Yellow Springs (*Huang Quan*; yellow was considered to be the colour of the soil [Berling 1992: 183]), in which a duke attempts to dig a tunnel there in order to reach his deceased mother (I.1) (Thompson 1992: 29). The most frequent term used to describe this place is *you*, which can mean hidden, deep/profound, moon, night, dark, far away, blood, and so on (ibid. 31). While these associations have led modern scholars such as Needham (1974: 81; also Poo 1998: 158) to describe the Yellow Springs as a shadowy Hades/Sheol-like underworld, Needham (1974: 84) himself quotes a reference to the Yellow Springs as a place where ‘joy and concord will be found’. Indeed, springs are often associated with life, regeneration, and immortality, for they are continually refreshed and renewed (see [Chapter 9](#)). It is significant that the realm is not called Yellow Swamp or Yellow Pit, for although it is a realm of darkness it is also a realm of rebirth.

An account of a spirit from Heaven visiting a man in his dream (VIII.V) confirms that Heaven was a realm distinct from the Yellow Springs; and demonstrates that the spirit has the ability to move between heavenly and earthly realms.

The text further explains that when the deceased’s two souls grow strong (i.e. spiritually), they become brighter and more ethereal until they become fully spiritualized, disembodied intelligence (X.VII).

The *Li ji* (some of which date as far back as the fifth century BCE) clarifies how the soul is divided into two parts, the *hun* and the *po*. The *hun*, the intelligent and spiritual soul, returns to the heavens from which it came; and the *po*, ‘the animal soul’ returns to the underworld with the body (*LCh* VII.I.7). These realms are also referred to as ‘the bright region’

and ‘the dark region’ (IX.III.17), the latter located in the north (II.II.1.34). This duality of souls reflects ‘the Yin-Yang⁶ antithesis of two fundamental forces in the universe’ (ibid. 86). As the two elements of the soul return to their origin points, death may be seen as the reconciliation of these forces. The word *po* is related to the word for ‘bright light’ which originally referred to the light of the moon, itself associated with the cycle of death and rebirth because of its waxing and waning (Poo 1998: 62). That these radiant beings go to ‘the dark region’ further demonstrates the interconnection and reconciliation of opposite forces (II.II.1.22). Such beings possess ‘abundant and rich’ powers. Silent and invisible, ‘they enter into all things and nothing is without them’.

After ascending, the *hun* ‘is displayed on high in a condition of glorious brightness’. Despite a reference to the ‘greatly virtuous’ attaining Heaven (XXVIII.1.44), there does not appear to be a moral antithesis of realms of reward and punishment. Both the *hun* in the upper realm and the *po* in the lower attain a state of divine transcendence. This conflicts with Mozi (c.479–38 BCE), who developed a rival philosophy to Confucianism (Mohism). He stated that heaven is on ‘the highest level ... spiritual beings on the middle level ... and living humans on the lowest’ (Chan 1963: 220).

Finally, the third to second century BCE *Shi Yi* (*Commentary on the Yi Jing* [Book of Changes]) compares the cycle of life and death to those of nature, adding that ‘the characteristics and conditions of spiritual beings are similar to those of Heaven and Earth’ (ibid. 265).

Early Daoist Texts

In the *Dao de jing* by Laozi (c. second half of the fourth century BCE, though possibly containing earlier material [Lau 1963: 124]), all human problems are attributed to being in a physical body (I.XIII.30a), implying a worryfree afterlife in a spiritualized state.

According to the *Wenzi*, a collection of sayings attributed to Laozi, death results in ‘no changes in the self’ (Cleary 1991: 33). The ‘higher soul’ is made of ‘heavenly energy’, the lower of ‘earthly energy’, and ‘each abides in its abode’. ‘Above there is a continuity with universal

oneness, and the vitality of universal oneness connects with heaven' (ibid. 120). Death is considered to be the spirit returning home (ibid. 172).

The *Zhuangzi* is a mystical and philosophical work by one of the founders of Daoism, with a core of seven chapters dating to c.319 BCE. It displays faith in the Creator regarding the afterlife: 'Where could he send me that would not be all right? I will go off to sleep peacefully, and then with a start I will wake up'.

After casting off the body, spirits experience 'turning and revolving, ending and beginning again, unaware of where they start or finish ... they wander free and easy in the service of inaction'.⁷ In the heavenly realm, one can 'wander in the mists, roam the infinite, and forget life forever and forever'; and join the creator 'to wander in the single breath of heaven and earth'. One's emotions survive the body, and dying is compared to awakening from a dream (Watson 1963: 85–8).

The Perfect Man becomes 'godlike', riding the clouds over the sun and the moon, and wandering beyond the seas. 'Even life and death have no effect upon him' (ibid. 46). He mounts 'the regularity of Heaven and Earth, riding the changes of the elemental forces to wander infinity ... the Perfect Man is without self'. The loss of the self is identified with the Absolute, as in this later passage: 'I ... expel my intellectual faculties, leave my substance, get rid of knowledge and become identical with the Great Universality' (Paper 1995: 133–4). Other advanced spirits variously 'enter into the mother of breath', ascend to the 'cloudy heavens', dwell in the Dark Palace, or become stars in the Milky Way (Watson 1963: 81–2).

The spirit of 'The Nameless Man' rides 'the Light-and-Lissome Bird out beyond the six directions, wandering in the village of Not-even-Anything and living in the Broad-and-Borderless field' (ibid. 93).

Similar abilities are attributed to a shamanic Holy Man, who also 'sucks the wind, drinks the dew' and 'rides a flying dragon' (Paper 1995: 33). It is not always clear whether the out-of-body experiences described are in an afterlife or shamanic context. The word often translated as 'shaman', *xian*, is also translated variously as 'the power to ascend', 'a "spirit" who dwells in the upper reaches of mountains', and 'one who lives for a long time' or who is immortal. It might also refer to the spirit ascending from the body on its cremation smoke (ibid. 54–5). In any case, although some of the poems involving spirit journeys do seem to be shamanic in character, the spiritual realms and states they describe appear to be one

and the same as the afterlife – a notion supported by encounters with other souls, and the conceptual commonality of oneness and transcendence.

Needham (1974: 71, 81) stresses the ‘earthly’ character of the Chinese afterlife (i.e. mountains, subterranean waters), and indeed there is sometimes ambiguity regarding whether a place referred to is an earthly (mythical) realm, or a metaphysical one. However, the distinction is somewhat obscure and perhaps conceptually irrelevant, if not meaningless. While some realms may be technically earthly, they are accessible only to the spirit, and only via spiritual modes of travel (ascent or descent). They are thus only *quasi*-earthly, and are effectively mythical to the non-spiritualized individual. Furthermore, since there was also a belief that ghosts could haunt earthly locales, a valid distinction can be made between the two types of ‘earthly’. Descriptions of ‘earthly’ places might simply be a way of expressing the concept of the spiritual world being an idealized mirror-image of earth.

The *Huainanzi* (122 BCE) states that the spirit ‘undergoes a series of transformations without end, dying and coming to renewed life’ (Morgan 1933: 33). Those who die prematurely become ghosts on earth (ibid. 34). The Sage-man ‘penetrates the three fountains below’ (i.e. the Yellow Springs), and ‘seeks the nine entrances into heaven above. The mind ... penetrates into the depths of creation. This is the sage’s movement of spirit’. The True-man ‘moves in the regions of the completely immaterial and travels the deserts of annihilation’. Riding the Fei Lien (a mythical long-haired, winged animal [ibid. 253, n.44]), and following the Tun Yü (the immortal genii), the spirit travels to supernatural realms ...

... and rests in a spiritual house. He has the ten suns for his candle, the wind and rain for his servants, the thunder-lord is his minister, and Kua Fu the genii is his messenger. He allies himself with the female genii, Mifei and Chihnu. How could Heaven and Earth be enough for the operations of such a being? (ibid. 44–5)

The afterlife fate of the ordinary individual is not described – it is stated only that he/she will have conflict and lack of peace.

Consistent with *Zh*, the text states that when the body has returned to earth and the spirit has returned to Heaven, ‘how can I exist? The “I” is dissolved’ (ibid. 58). The soul is described as ‘a living part of the whole

universe and is placed in an environment of great clarity' (ibid. 66). 'He who is aware of the joys of a former existence will not be alarmed by death.... To pass from non-existence to a state of existence; to pass from existence to a state of non-existence is a continuous round without end or beginning' (ibid. 74). The text also refers to four heavenly palaces 'which oversee [the administration of] recompenses and punishments' – an explicit reference to judgement (Seidel 1982: 108).

Chu ci and Other Poems

The poems in *Chu ci* (*Songs of the South*) are culturally distinct from the *Shijing* (which originated in the north), and are of a more popular, noncanonical, and indeed 'outlandish and unorthodox' nature (Hawkes 1985: 26). Though they borrow from *Zh*, many concern love affairs between shamans and deities. References to the Yellow Springs are notably rare. With much repetition, colourful imagery, and profuse detail, only the general substance of these poems can be conveyed here.

The poem 'Li Sao' ('On Encountering Trouble'; after 343 BCE [ibid. 60]) is emblematic of these texts. It describes a spiritual ascent on a phoenix-shaped chariot pulled by jade dragons. The spirit reaches the 'fairy precincts' of the 'Hanging Gardens' (a paradise on a terrace of Mt. Kunlun [ibid. 327]) where dragons drink from the Pool of Heaven and are tied to the heavenly Fu-sang tree which grows in the east. The sun ascends this tree when it rises, the ten suns roost in it at night, and the dragons which carry souls to heaven are tethered to it (ibid. 325; Loewe 1979: 52). It is an *axis mundi* which connects heaven, the earth, and the Yellow Springs (ibid. 111), and is associated with the popular underworld deity Queen Mother of the West, who enabled the maintenance of cosmic order so that immortality and the cycles of rebirth could continue (ibid. 87).

The spirit stops the sun from setting, then strikes it with a branch broken from the Ruo tree (the source of the red light of the sunset [Hawkes 1985: 334]). Accompanied by Xi He the 'charioteer of the sun' (ibid. 339), Wang Shu the 'charioteer of the moon' (ibid. 337), the Wind God, the Bird of Heaven, and the Thunder God, he is welcomed by whirlwinds, clouds, and rainbows (ibid. 73). At the gate of heaven he asks the porter to let him

through, but the porter 'leant across heaven's gate and eyed me churlishly'. The spirit crosses White Water which flows through Mt. Kunlun (ibid. 90) and arrives at the House of Spring (a celestial locale presided over by the Green Dragon [ibid. 327]). Desiring to woo the river goddess (Fu Fei), he commands the Thunder God (Feng Long) to find her. Other locales visited include Qiongshi mountain, the realm of Lord Y the Mighty Archer (ibid. 334), and Weipan stream (ibid. 74). He reaches Mt. Kunlun via a long, winding road which passes through the Ford of Heaven (a constellation; ibid. 334) and beyond 'the world's western end'. He is accompanied by phoenixes to the 'Desert of Moving Sands' and the 'Banks of the Red Water' where he has water-dragons make a bridge for him so that he may cross. The God of the West (likely associated with the underworld, and perhaps counterpart to the Queen Mother of the West) assists his crossing, and further difficulties are encountered on a subsequent long journey. He is accompanied by a thousand chariots of jade drawn by dragons with 'cloud-embroidered banners', past the celestial Mt. Buzhou in the west of Mt. Kunlun (ibid. 94). There is music and dancing, though a single ultimate destination is not named (ibid. 77–8).

In a section of the poem *Jiu Zhang* (*Nine Pieces*, pre-76 BCE [ibid. 153]) called '*She jiang*' ('Crossing the river'), the spirit ascends on a team of blue dragons assisted by white serpents, up Mt. Kunlun to the Garden of Jasper to eat 'the flower of jade' which provides 'long life'. The spirit adds, 'the sun and the moon were not more bright than I' (ibid. 160).

'*Yuan You*' ('Far-Off Journey'; c. second century BCE), states that immortal ancestors (the Pure Ones, analogous to *Zhuangzi*'s Perfect Men) 'lived on in a star', attained 'oneness', and 'in the ether's transformations they rose upwards; with godlike swiftness miraculously moving ... their bright spirit forms dart across the sky' (ibid. 191). The spirit ascends on the south wind (ibid. 195), meets 'Feathered Men on the Hill of Cinnabar' and spends time in the Land of Immortality. Cinnabar was believed to have life-giving properties, and Daoists who became immortals were said to have green feathers. The spirit bathes in the Gulf of Brightness, dries himself on the coast of heaven, and drinks 'the subtle liqueur of the Flying Spring'. His face like radiant jade, he journeys to the deserted south and ascends on a cloud higher than the highest heaven. After the gate of heaven, the Thunder God is sent ahead as a guide to ask the way to the Palace of Mystery (part of a constellation). The spirit then passes through

the Bright Walls, enters the House of God, visits the Week Star, gazes upon the Pure City, then proceeds to the Court of Heaven, and to Wei Lü, an abyss in the Eastern Sea into which the waters of the ocean drain (ibid. 201–2). His chariot flies banners of clouds and rainbows, accompanied by horses and ten-thousand other chariots, on a journey through the constellations of the four directions (ibid. 196). He continues eastwards to the realm of Gou Mang (the bird-headed spirit of the east, associated with the Green Dragon of the Palace of Spring; ibid. 202). With the wind god as his scout he crosses the eastern heaven, accompanied by phoenixes. He meets Ru Shou (an axe-wielding tiger-human spirit of the west, associated with the White Tiger of the Palace of Autumn; ibid.). Carrying the Broom Star (‘a comet, used by deities to sweep away evil’; Waley 1955: 42) and Dipper by their handles, he drifts ‘on the moving waves of fleeting mist’ to the realm of Xuan Wu (a turtle guardian of the Palace of Winter and spirit of the north, with a snake wrapped round his middle; ibid.). Enlisting the help of Wen Chang (‘a cluster of stars in Ursa Minor’; ibid.) and ensuring the gods are in their places in his retinue (e.g. the rain god as guide, and the thunder god as guard), he travels the endless road to ‘the height of heaven’. ‘Boundless satisfaction suffused [his] inner being’ along with a ‘reckless sense of freedom’, ‘contentment’, and a reluctance to return to ‘life’. After a moment of doubt, and nostalgia for his earthly life, he heads straight for the sun (Fiery God), ‘into the emptiness ... beyond the world’s end’, and yet further onwards until he is stopped by Zhu Rong (the sun’s attendant, and spirit of the south) who warns him to ‘turn back’. Ignoring the warning, he sends a phoenix to find Fu Fei, makes ‘the Xiang goddesses play on their zithers, and ... the Sea God dance with the River God’. Goddesses danced with ‘water monsters ... the woman-rainbow made circles around them’ and the ‘music swelled into infinity’. With another northern deity (Zhuan), he continues to ‘the world’s other end’, over ice to the Gate of Coldness and the Freezing Fountain. Crossing the realm of the deity Xuan Ming, he summons the creator/water-god Qian Lei and sends him ahead as guide. He travels ‘the four outlands, the six regions, the lightning’s fissure, the Great Abyss’. ‘Transcending Inaction, I came to Purity, and entered the neighborhood of the Great Beginning’ (Hawkes 1985: 197–8).

A contemporary poem is ‘*Xi Shi*’ (‘Sorrow for Troth Betrayed’), in which the spirit has the Scarlet Bird (a guardian spirit of the south [ibid.

334]; scarlet being symbolic of immortality [Birrell 1993: 183]) fly before him as guide, riding 'in the ivory chariot of the Great Unity' with the sun and moon as awnings. Accompanied by Jade Girls (star deities of dazzling brightness [Hawkes 1985: 242]), after passing 'through the midst of sombre shadows' he reaches Kunlun. There he finds 'limitless bliss', though he continues onwards, crossing the Red River, and riding a swan to visit the immortals playing zithers on the moon. With feelings of calm and peace, he 'rested in the whirlwind' and 'inhaled all the essences'.

According to another second century BCE poem, '*Qi Jian*' ('Seven Remonstrances'), flowers and cassia are in bloom on Mt. Kunlun even in winter. Drinking 'the dewy vapours' gives longevity to the spirit (ibid. 240). He passes through the 'gates of the House of Darkness hidden in caverns under the rocky cliff-face', and inhabited by water-serpents and dragonspirits. 'Deep below the surface ..., my unhoused spirit drifted disconsolate.' In an apparent reference to a morally determined fate (and perhaps self-judgement), he adds 'If only I could be sure that my acts had been faultless I could still be happy, even in my dissolution' (ibid. 255).

Also of similar date is '*Ai shi ming*' ('Alas, That my Lot Was Not Cast') in which the spirit tries to reach Kunlun, but is forced to return to his body when Weak Water (so-called because nothing can float in it [ibid. 337]) bars his way.

The poem '*Zhao hun*' ('Summons of the Soul', c.277–248 BCE; ibid. 223) is an exhortation for the soul to return to its body, warning of the perils it might encounter otherwise. In the east are 'giants a thousand fathoms tall' who hunt souls which are consumed by 'ten suns that come out together, melting metal, dissolving stone'. In the south are people with 'tattooed faces and blackened teeth' who 'sacrifice the flesh of men and pound their bones for meat paste'. There are poisonous snakes, including one with nine heads which 'swallows men as a sweet relish' (ibid. 224). In the eternal punishment of the west are 'moving sands' which stretch for a hundred leagues, and Thunder's Chasm which one is at risk of being 'swept into and dashed in pieces'. It is a land of burning, arid, empty desert filled with 'red ants as huge as elephants and wasps as big as gourds', and only 'dry stalks' to eat. In the north are walls of ice and a hundred leagues of snowdrifts. The gates of Heaven are guarded by tigers and leopards ready to tear apart 'mortal men'; by a 'man with nine heads that can pull up nine-thousand trees'; and by 'slant-eyed jackal-wolves

[which] pad to and fro', restless and sleepless, ready to drop humans into an abyss. In the Land of Darkness lies Yo Pei, described as having nine coils, a horned tiger's head with three eyes, a bull's body, a hunched back, and 'bloody thumbs'. The deity is also referred to as Lord of Heaven (Yo Hao, a.k.a. Shangdi), though the relationship between him and Yo Pei is not delineated (Erkes 1940: 189–90). While judgement is implied by such perils, the criteria for admission to the different realms are not given.

Similar is '*Da Zhao*' ('The Great Summons', 206 BCE), though with differing descriptions of each realm, and no mention of Heaven or the Land of Darkness. In the east lies the desolate 'Gulf of Brightness', covered in fog and rain, and with a vast sea of endless, turbulent waves filled with water dragons. In the south is 'a hundred leagues of flaming fire and coiling cobras'. Among other threatening 'monsters', tigers and leopards prowl the mountains, and dangerous cow-fish and snakes inhabit the waters. In addition to the 'moving sands', the west has 'swine-headed ... shaggy' beasts with menacing eyes, 'long claws and serrated teeth', and 'wild, mad laughter'. On the northern Frozen Mountain is the 'Torch Dragon, glaring red', and a river of limitless depth 'that cannot be crossed'. 'The sky is white and glittering, deathly cold' (Hawkes 1985: 232).

The 'Nine Songs' were compiled no earlier than the second century BCE, though some of the content is 'much earlier' (ibid. 9). 'Da si ming' (Greater Master of Fate), who greets the spirit in the heavens in Song V, was a shamanic chthonic deity who was in earlier times a heavenly deity, and is named as a star in *Shi* (27, 2a; Erkes 1940: 25, 27). The association of a deity of Fate, 'the bestower of life and death' (ibid. 109) with a spiritual journey again suggests judgement. Shao si ming (Lesser Master of Fate) in Song VI was a minor astral deity (ibid. 200). The shaman ascends to bathe with him 'in the Pool of Heaven'. In a reference to the god's role as judge, the shaman says, 'You only, Fragrant One, are worthy to be judge over men' (Hawkes 1985: 111–12).

'The Lord of the East' is a deity associated with shamans, and the sun. In Song VII, the shaman ascends on horses from the east, before descending on a 'gloomy night journey back to the east' (ibid. 112–13). This indicates that the spirit returns via the underworld 'to the land of sunrise', associating his/her journey with that of the sun (Waley 1955: 46).

In Song VIII, the shaman joins the ‘The River Earl’, and together they wander the nine rivers in a water chariot. Surviving whirlpools and waves, they ascend Mt. Kunlun to the god’s palace, built of shells, pearls, and fish and dragon-scales. They ride a white turtle, chase fish, and wander in the islets before returning east (Hawkes 1985: 114–15).

In ‘*Jiu tan*’ (‘Nine Laments’, 77–6 BCE [ibid. 280]), the spirit chooses ‘attendant spirits in the Land of Great Darkness’, travels westwards to ‘heaven’s portals by the Dark Gate’, and has various experiences by now familiar from other *Chu ci* poems. Joined by ‘all the gods’, ‘I flung open God’s palace and his heavenly park, ascending the Hanging Gardens whose brightness blinded me’. He defeats the thunder and lightning, evil spirits, and the Wind God, and ‘imprisoned the Dark Spirit in the Pit of Night’. Becoming vaporous and formless, ‘mounting the void, treading the dark sky ...’, he enters the House of God shaking his wings’. He races the wind and rain, and ‘wanders without end’ (ibid. 302).

In ‘*Jiu hua*’ (‘Nine Regrets’, c.60–50 BCE [ibid. 270]) the spirit, dressed in red and green silk robes, ascends on the sun and moon, and on a whirlwind to the Milky Way where he joins ‘the company of the Immortals’ (ibid. 272–3). In addition to the typical experiences, he rides black dragons and the Scarlet Bird, and commands Zhao Ming to open heaven’s gates. ‘Radiating brightness’, he is able to float over Weak Water to visit the Lord of Heaven. Past North Bridge at Summer City his ‘mind is illuminated with understanding: Here in this place I shall find self-knowledge’ (ibid. 275–6).

Popular Songs

From as early as 200 BCE, the governmental Bureau of Music collected (and even commissioned) songs from across the Han Empire and other parts of China (Birrell 1988: 6). The afterlife conceptions they reveal are broadly comparable to those found in *Cci*.

Notable additions include Mt. Tsung Kao, realm of the immortals, visited under a shamanic trance. It has five peaks with golden turrets, jewels of many colours, unicorns, antelope, chimeras, various birds, and magical mushrooms (probably hallucinogenic, enabling the shamanic

journey). At the gates of Jade Hall, the spirit is questioned, 'What do you seek?' The reply is, 'I wish to follow the holy way, to seek only long life.' He is told to 'gather the sacred herb from the tip of Illusion Tree' which will be processed by a white hare and a tortoise, and will make him 'divine' ('The Ballad of Tung Flees', *ibid.* 70).

According to another ballad ('Walking Out of Hsia Gate'), those who are good attain 'the way of holy immortals' at death. They visit the Royal Father and Mother (perhaps Shangdi and the Queen Mother of the West; [*ibid.* 75]), and live on Mt. Tai. A guide and companion, Red Pine, is met 'four or five leagues away from Heaven', takes the reins (presumably of the chariot), and steers them to Heaven. Another song refers to Mt. Hao Li, south of Mt. Tai (*ibid.* 193, n.20). Ruled by the King of Ghosts, it is also called Burial Village, and is 'teeming' with 'souls and spirits, none wise, none fool' (*ibid.* 98).⁸

Shanhaijing

Also of similar character is the *Shanhaijing*. In Book II (third century BCE), the Queen Mother of the West lives on Mt. Jade. Mt. Kunlun is called the Mound of Offspringline, and 'the Great God's City Here Below'. It is ruled by a nine-tailed tiger-human deity called Land My who 'presides over the Nine Parts of the Sky and the Great God's Park for the Seasons', as the quail presides over his 'Hundred Equipments'. A ram-like animal with four horns called 'earth-cricket' devours humans; and a large bee-like bird called 'awe-source' kills with its sting. There are various magical-medicinal plants, such as a pear-like fruit which keeps people from drowning when they consume it (Birrell 1999: 23–4).

In Book XI (c.6 BCE; *ibid.* xv), the plateau of the mountain is called the Waste of Offspringline and is described as being eight-hundred leagues square and eighty-thousand feet high. Giant 'tree-barley' grows there, and there are nine wells on each face of the mountain, all with jade railings. There are nine gates on each fence with nine-headed, tigerlike 'openbright' animals (*kaiming*) facing east, guarding 'the dwelling place of the hundred deities' (*ibid.* 140). One stands atop the mountain, surrounded by magical trees and mythical and earthly beings such as the

autophagus, self-regenerating Shihjou which ‘looks like a lump of liver’ (Birrell 1993: 183), Divine Wind Bird, a six-headed bird, alligators, snakes, apes, leopards, and Wonderbirds ‘which wear snakes on their heads and tread snakes underfoot’, and wear ‘a scarlet snake on their breasts’.

The corpse of the murdered god Notch Flaw (Ya Yü), a human-headed snake, is encircled by a group of shamans – ‘custodians of the secret of preserving life’ (ibid. 184). They are named or described as ‘drum sound’, ‘needling with a thorn’, ‘pierce’ (or ‘slander’, or ‘straight root’), the sun, the moon (or lunar eclipse), and ‘treading on’ (i.e. on shamanic equipment). Notch Flaw holds ‘the never die drug to ward off decay’ (Birrell 1999: 141). Twelve corpses are referred to *passim* in *Shj*, all of which belonged to humans who were transformed into gods or composite human/animal beings following a heroic death. The idea of life being found within death was related to the concept of ‘immortality gained through shamanic techniques’ (ibid. 209).

Other locales described in the text may also have afterlife relevance, such as Mt. Divinehuman, covered with gold and jade at its top but arsenic on its slopes (Book II, Birrell 1993: 19).

A change in afterlife conceptions occurred under Emperor Wu (c.140–87 BCE), with a focus on the *xian* as an element of the soul or state of being which was capable of immortality via ascent to heaven *before* death (Yü 1987: 387). Because the *xian* belonged to a different category of being to the *hun*, a separate realm was required. The afterlife was thus restructured, and the *hun* were effectively relocated to Mt. Tai, ruled by the Lord of the mountain who lived on the nearby hill Liangfu. ‘Lord’ here is mainly a bureaucratic designation, for he actually ranked lower than the earthly emperor. He was assisted in governing the dead by lesser bureaucrats in a system which mirrored that of the Han government. When the peak of Mt. Tai also became the exclusive preserve of *xian*, the *hun* were left with only Liangfu. Mt. Tai became symbolic of immortality, while Liangfu grew to symbolize death. There was also at this time a separate underworld for *po* souls, also called *Po* or the ‘court of ghosts’ (ibid. 389ff.).

Funerary Documents

Han funerary documents (mid-second century BCE) depict an afterlife bureaucracy which mirrors that of the earthly realm (Harper 1999: 869). The documents purportedly originated with the heavenly deity, and were intended to introduce the deceased into the underworld system (Seidel 1987: 25). Written on bamboo, they record grave goods and titles of officials such as Lord of the Underworld, Assistant Magistrate of the Underworld, and Assistant of the Dead.

Some texts reveal an anxiety over the efficiency of underworld officials, appealing to them to be sure they have the right person, and that the deceased is being taken at the right time (ibid. 32). They also contain ordinances ensuring that he/she will not be punished for wrong behaviour, and will not have to pay taxes and fines to the underworld demons (ibid. 45). There are even references to the deceased receiving rental income. One document refers to the deceased as 'heavenly light'. On a three-thousand mile journey to the 'Heavenly Emperor and Sacred Teacher', he/she encounters dangers such as the soul-eating demon of the South Mountain (Poo 1998: 173–5).

Bronze mirrors (c.100 BCE–c.150 CE) are thought to have had a similar function, as well as situating the deceased 'in correct relation with the cosmos' (Loewe 1979: 83). They are inscribed with texts revealing changes in focus regarding conceptions of paradise. The earliest stress the energies of Yin and Yang; the later stress descriptions of the inhabitants of the afterlife realm; and the latest focus on the Queen Mother of the West (ibid. 60). The experiences and realms they describe are, nevertheless, consistent with the poetry reviewed above, with references to Mt. Tai, various immortal beings, ascent, supernatural creatures, springs, cosmic wanderings, the Herb of Life, and an existence of 'eternal joy without end, as is fit for a nobleman or king' (ibid. 198).

Finally, on Han gravestones and in popular literature of the mid-first century BCE, Kaoli (Lower Village) at the foot of Mt. Tai became a popular abode of the dead, and was identified with the Yellow Springs (Yü 1987: 391–3).

Summary and Conclusions

Despite changes over time, the earliest Chinese afterlife references on the Shang oracle bones contain elements which remained consistent throughout the periods under consideration: ascent to a heavenly realm, meeting deceased relatives, and apotheosis or dwelling with the gods in a godlike state. The nature and context of the oracle bone inscriptions precluded more detailed descriptions, which do not appear until the more substantial Classics. The elements added by the Classics are largely (thematically) consistent with the early Daoist texts. They include beings of light, judgement and morally determined fates, the afterlife being a return 'home' to the origin state, a subterranean realm which is also a realm of joy and renewal, the concept of spiritual progression and intermediate states, the afterlife realm being located in both the east and west, dual souls, universal oneness, and divine omnipresence.

The early Daoist texts and the unclassifiable poems also contain a wealth of detailed descriptions of various realms and entities which do not correspond to anything in the Classics, and in many cases are unique. They also show a greater focus on metaphysical concepts such as the transcendence of the self and merging with the divine. Differences or additions include increased idealized mirror-images of earth and quasi-earthly mythical locales, a proliferation of mythical beings, river crossings and other obstacles/barriers, more explicit solar, lunar, and celestial associations, and rebirth. Further details are found in the funerary documents, though again they supplement rather than contradict the other material, while emphasizing afterlife bureaucracy (again, mirroring that of earth).

Interestingly, despite cultural differences, the afterlife conceptions of the northern and southern poetry do not differ significantly, other than in detail (suggesting that differences between earlier and later texts are not due to geographical origin). The only situation in which a deliberate and obvious *change* can be discerned (as opposed to differences or elaborations) is the displacement of *hun* souls to accommodate the *xian*. It is therefore not clear whether the overall differences are due mainly to actual changes of conceptions over time, or simply to the fact that the texts grew more explicit in their descriptions. In other words, the fact that the earlier texts do not reveal details regarding each element of the afterlife experience does not mean that any given element did not exist – particularly considering the context in which the early afterlife

descriptions occur: divinatory oracle bones and Confucian texts concerned with earthly matters, in which the afterlife material is almost incidental. There is not enough information in the earlier periods to allow us to conclude for certain one way or the other.

Judgement, for example, is not a key feature until the later material and is never particularly stressed; though hints do appear as far back as the earliest Classic we have considered, the *Shijing*. In that text as well as in *Chunqiu* and *Hnz*, judgement is done by heaven or the heavenly deity. In *Cci*, it is a matter for the Lesser Master of Fate (Shao si ming), though perhaps is also undertaken by the self. Punishment is evident from the deceased being thrown to deities in *Shi*, to the abyss in *Cci*, and the various perils in the poetry. Judgement also takes place in the underworld when it concerns the living (Thompson 1983: 37–8), though for the dead there does not appear to be any morally based distinction between the upper and lower realms.⁹ In general, heavens are not in direct opposition to underworlds – on the contrary, they are associated with each other (especially when it comes to mountain realms).

The differences between the various afterlife states are unclear; for example, whether the heavenly realm(s) and the state of universal oneness are one and the same, and which individuals go where. The explicit divine omnipresence in *Li* and elsewhere may hold the answer, for if one becomes a god he or she is capable of multiple experiences, separately or at once. Indeed, the afterlife is characterized as eternal cosmic wandering in *Zh* and later.

However, the notion of multiple experiences cannot explain key differences, such as the introduction of the *xian* concept. It is probable that in addition to multiple experiences and intermediate states, there was not a single, all-pervasive conception of the afterlife, but rather differing, conflicting ones held by different groups of people, or even individuals (Poo 1998: 211). Nevertheless, a core of thematic similarities can be discerned between all periods and traditions reviewed here.

Chapter 8

Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica

Introduction

There are two types of written sources for Mesoamerican afterlife conceptions. The most important here are the wholly indigenous works composed before the Spanish conquest (1521 CE). Though these were only recorded after the conquest (in indigenous languages using the Latin alphabet), they were partly transcribed from earlier hieroglyphic texts, and partly based on pre-conquest oral literature (Roys 1933: 3; Bierhorst 1992: 3, 7). They were largely subversive attempts by the Maya and Aztec priests to preserve the ancient traditions and oral literature from the Spanish efforts to eradicate them in a campaign of forced conversion to Christianity. These texts include the Maya *Popol Vuh* and the *Books of Chilam Balam*; and the Aztec *Legends of the Sun*, *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* (contained in Codex Chimalpopoca), and *Cantares Mexicanos*.

Secondary are reports written by the Spanish *conquistadores*. Because such material is often compromised by Christianizing interpretations of local beliefs, and by dismissive, superior attitudes, they are to be used with caution. An important exception is Bernardino de Sahagun's unusually reliable ethnography *History of the Things of New Spain*.

The *Popol Vuh*

The *Popol Vuh*, or *The Light that Came from Beyond the Sea*, is a revelatory, divinatory, and mythological work. The surviving text dates to

c.1554–1558 CE, though its content likely originated at least a thousand years earlier, and perhaps even as early as 300 BCE in oral form (Coe 2002: 162). The relevant section concerns the descent of the Hero Twins, 1-Hunahpu¹ (a fertility god) and 7-Hunahpu (or Vucub-Hunahpu) to the underworld realm of Xibalba – ‘a world beyond the visible sky’ (Tedlock 1996: 251).

While playing a ball-game, the Twins annoy the Lords of Xibalba (1-Death and 7-Death) below by making noise (*PV* 91). The Lords are described as being ‘black and white’, desirous of conflict, ‘not really divine’, ‘ancient evil ... makers of enemies’, ‘inciters to wrongs and violence’, and ‘masters of stupidity, and ... perplexity’ (139). Lesser underworld deities include Scab Stripper, Blood Gatherer, and Demons of Pus, Jaundice, Filth, and Woe, whose punishment techniques reflect their names. Another, called Packstrap, causes sudden death by inducing his victim to vomit blood. There are two staff bearers: Bone Sceptre and Skull Sceptre (92).

The Twins are taken to the underworld by the messengers Shooting Owl, One-Legged Owl, and Skull Owl (a head with wings). The Twins tell their mother that although they are going to the underworld, they ‘are not dying’ (93).

They descend on the path to Xibalba, passing the intersection of Rustling Canyon and Gurgling Canyon, and over Scorpion Rapids (literally rapids filled with scorpions; equated with the constellation Scorpius. Other locales may also correspond to celestial bodies [*ibid.* 256]). Crossing Blood River and Pus River, they arrive at a crossroads of four different coloured paths: red, white, yellow, and black.

They take the black path to the ‘council place’ of Xibalba, where instead of a council of gods, they find only wooden manikins of them. The gods laugh at the Twins’ dismay (94–5), then bid them to sit. The only seat is a ‘burning-hot rock,’ and the gods laugh again when the Twins are burned.

They are then sent to the Dark House, where there is nothing but darkness. A messenger brings them each a torch and a cigar which must be returned intact the next day, despite the fact that they are already lit. They also endure Jaguar House, Bat House, Razor House, and Rattling House, which is ‘heavy with cold’, wind, and hail. These are only ‘the first tests of Xibalba’ (96–7).

The Twins are sacrificed for using the cigars and torches, though not before somehow, at some indeterminate point, becoming one person. Their head is placed in the fork of a melon tree, causing it to bear fruit, and the head to transform into a melon (97). Blood Moon, the virgin daughter of Blood Gatherer, attempts to pick the melon/head, but it spits at her and imparts the knowledge it learned from the deities Newborn Thunderbolt, Sudden Thunderbolt, and Hurricane: that in death ‘one does not disappear, but goes on being fulfilled ... you will not die’ (99). Thunderbolt deities carry ‘lightning-striking axes’ and are associated with fertility, the underworld, and the rain god Chac (ibid. 225; Hultkrantz 1967: 226).

Blood Moon then relays her newfound knowledge to the Twins’ mother on earth: that they ‘are alive, they are not dead. They have merely made a way for the light to show itself’. The saliva of 1/7-Hunahpu’s head/melon has made Blood Moon pregnant, and she gives birth to Twins: Hunahpu and Xblanque (102) – effectively divine twins born of twins who became one at death, and a virgin goddess of the moon and the underworld.

When the Twins are grown, they too are summoned to the underworld and their experiences duplicate those of their father(s), with some differences. There is the added menace of ‘throng birds’ (large black hawks [Tedlock 1996: 272]). The yellow path has been replaced by a green one, which is significant because of a prayer that the deceased keep to the Green Road (PV 192–3).² In Maya iconography, green is the colour of the *axis mundi*, and it is through this axis that the sacred Yaxche tree grows – the ‘first tree of the world’, symbolic of life and fertility (ibid. 261).

The Twins prove cleverer than their father(s), and send a mosquito (in actuality a ‘hair that Hunahpu had plucked from his own shin’ [119]) to spy on the Lords of Xibalba, and to try to suck their blood to determine if they are real or manikins. The first two are in fact wooden, though the third and fourth are actually 1-Death and 7-Death. Each Lord is met and bitten by the mosquito, and each is named by the one ranking below him (the Demons of Filth and Woe now having been replaced by Bloody Teeth and Bloody Claws) (116–17). The Twins thus know the names of all the Lords of Xibalba, and this knowledge gives them some sort of advantage or abilities. The Twins are therefore not fooled into sitting on the hot rock. They outwit the Lords in the cigar-and-torch test in the Dark House by substituting macaw feathers for the torch’s flame, and fireflies for the cigar embers (119).

The Lords of Xibalba then challenge the Twins to a ball-game played with a skull, ‘clattering and twisting all over the floor of the court’. A sacrificial knife – The White Dagger – emerges from the skull (120), and the Twins accuse the Lords of trying to kill them. They resume play with the Twins’ ball, and the Lords win the game. As a prize they want one bowl of red flower petals, one of white, one of yellow, and one of whole flowers (121–2). The Twins are sent to Razor House where they immobilize knives which fly towards them by saying, ‘This is yours; the flesh of all the animals’ (apparently propitiating the knives with meat). They then send ants to steal flowers from the Lords’ own garden (despite the watchful eyes of two guardian birds), and present them to the Lords, outwitting them once again (123).

To the astonishment of the Lords, the Twins survive not only Razor House, but also Cold House (apparently the same as Rattling House), and Jaguar House (124). In a new torment, ‘The Midst of the Fire’, the Twins are not burned, ‘just toasted, just simmered, so they were well when it dawned’.

In Bat House, however, Hunahpu is decapitated by a ‘snatch-bat’³ – ‘monstrous beasts, their snouts like knives, the instruments of death’. His head rolls onto the ball-court and the Lords rejoice (125–6).

Xblanque then asks ‘all the animals’ to bring their food. The coati (a racoon-like animal) brings a squash which ‘became a simulated head for Hunahpu’. Eyes are carved in it, and ‘brains came from the thinker, from the sky’⁴ ... the Heart of the Sky, Hurricane ... who came down into Bat House’. Hunahpu is made whole at dawn, and despite his squash-head he looks and speaks the same (127).

Another game is played, this time with Hunahpu’s head. The Twins retrieve the head and it is restored to Hunahpu. They then plant the squash, though also substitute it for the head on the playing field. They win the game, but the ‘head’ breaks open, spilling its seeds on the court. The Lords realize they have again been outwitted (128–9), and they burn the Twins to death in an oven – but not before the Twins have made special arrangements for the treatment of their charred bones. They instruct two seers, Xulu and Pacam, to convince the Lords to grind them to powder once they are dead, and put them into the river (130). When this is done, the ashes sink to the bottom. After five days ‘they become handsome boys; they looked just the same as before when they reappeared’.

This resurrection gives the Twins divine and transformative powers. They appear to the lesser underworld deities as catfish, and perform ritual animal dances dressed as vagabonds. They swallow swords, walk on stilts, and perform ‘many miracles’, such as setting fire to a house and then restoring it. To the intense admiration of the gods, they sacrifice themselves and are resurrected yet again. The Twins are then taken on a path, with further ‘troubles’ and ‘torments’, to 1-Death and 7-Death so that they, too, might witness such wonders (131–2).

When they arrive, 1-Death and 7-Death ask the Twins their identities, their origins, tribe, and home. They reply, ‘we’ve never known’ (133). This may suggest a further step in their spiritual transformation, involving loss of ego or a state of pure consciousness in which identity and relations to earthly social determinants like ‘tribe’ are irrelevant; though it may simply be an attempt to conceal their identity.

The Twins perform miracles for the Lords – sacrificing their dog and then reanimating it; setting fire to their house with flames that did not burn; and removing the heart from a human sacrifice victim, then resuscitating him. Finally, Xblanque sacrifices Hunahpu – he ties him spread-eagle, decapitates him, and cuts his heart out, which is then ‘smothered in a leaf’ – then brings him back to life (134–6). This is the fourth time Hunahpu has died and been resurrected in the underworld (twice by beheading).

The Lords are so delighted that they ask the Twins to sacrifice *them*. The Twins oblige, killing both 1-Death and 7-Death – but they do not resurrect them. The Twins accomplished this defeat of the Lords ‘only through wonders, only through self-transformation’. The other underworld gods perform the heart sacrifice on the dead Lords, ‘for the purpose of destroying them’ (137–8).

The Twins then reveal their identities to the remaining deities of Xibalba, and tell them they will be the next to die. They explain that they intend to ‘clear the road of the torments and troubles of our fathers’. The gods weep and admit they were wrong to harm the Twins’ fathers, and tell them that they are buried beneath the underworld ball-court.

The Twins show mercy, but only on the condition that the deities no longer live on human sacrifices. The origin of morally determined afterlife punishment is explained here, for the exception is that they may consume

‘worthless’ beings, such as ‘the guilty, the violent’ (though they are also permitted to eat ‘the wretched, the afflicted’).

The Twins resurrect their father(s) (now referred to as 7-Hunahpu), put him back together again, and ask him to name the parts of his face. When he can only remember the eyes, nose, and mouth, the Twins depart, assuring him that he ‘will be prayed to’ and remembered by future generations.

They then ascend ‘here into the middle of the light ... straight on into the sky, and the sun belongs to one and the moon belongs to the other’.⁵ They are joined by the four-hundred boys (perhaps the Pleiades [ibid. 287]), and become ‘the sky’s own stars’ (140–2).

The moon is usually a goddess in Maya cosmology (ibid.). In the Dresden Codex, Ixchel (an earth/moon goddess of childbirth) as well as the Twins are associated with Venus, represented iconographically as a skull (Coe 1989: 180, 259). Venus itself is related to rebirth and renewal, and is referred to as the ‘sun-carrier’ (e.g. *PV* 150). In the Maya calendar, the Twins and the two Lords of Xibalba are all associated with Venus. The five perilous houses and the five manifestations of severed heads in *PV* (1/7-Hunahpu’s melon/head, the skull-ball of the Lords of Xibalba, Hunahpu’s head decapitated by the snatch-bat, his head as a ball, and the carved squash head) may parallel the five phases of Venus (Tedlock 1996: 207, 279; cf. 39).⁶ Earlier in the book (*PV* 77–81), the gods send the Twins to vanquish 7-Macaw (a.k.a. Vucub Caquix), the usurper and impersonator of the sun, the light, and the moon. They are thus protectors of the *true* sun, which through their underworld journey of renewal and their celestial ascent/transformation is associated with the afterlife.

The sixteenth-century Pokomán Maya considered Xblanque to be a guide for souls in the afterlife (Coe 1975: 91). ‘Xblanque’ is etymologically connected to the root for ‘sun’, and a word which means both ‘jaguar’ and ‘hidden’ (Tedlock 1996: 239). As a fertility/corn-god, 1-Hunahpu’s death and resurrection reflects the agricultural cycle (Coe 1989: 167). Both the melon and the squash are agricultural symbols, and are prominent in the text – significantly in their association with the ‘deceased’. When the Twins are burned in the oven, the corn they had planted in their mother’s garden ‘grew again’ (*PV* 139).

The Twins are therefore associated with the sun, fertility and rebirth, the ancient Jaguar death-god (known from Olmec representations), the circuit

of Venus through the underworld and the sky, and the moon-goddess Ixchel. They achieve a state of divine omnipresence and totality involving various celestial bodies, and the divine (of both sexes) and the earthly in an ultimate union, brought about by physical death, an underworld journey, ascent, and spiritual transformation and rebirth.

The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel

Despite the late compilation date of *CBC* (late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries), other than occasional token references to Christ and Jerusalem it contains little Christian influence (Roys 1933: 6). Chilam Balam was a prophet, and the text is primarily prophetic and oracular in nature.

There are thirteen levels of heaven and nine of the underworld, each with its own god.⁷ The number ‘nine’ is associated with rebirth (e.g. in the creation myth in *CBC* 104–5), likely in reference to the human gestation period (López Austin 1997: 262). Each set of deities is also one deity, the heavenly Oxlahun-ti-ku, and the underworld Bolon-ti-ku (Roys 1933: 99, n.3). The latter sits on a red mat, a symbol of authority.⁸ An association between the realms of life and death occurs when Oxlahun-ti-ku adopts the guise of Bolon-ti-ku. He sits on a flower with a piece of wood in one hand, a tree in the other, blindfolded and full of sin. In a reversal of the earthly order, his food and drink cry out.

Pauhtuns,⁹ four ancestral spirits or deities of the cardinal points and the four winds and rains, are said to be coloured red, white, black, and yellow (Love 1994: 82) – the same as the roads to Xibalba in the first descent myth of *PV*.

Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán

This report by Diego de Landa (c.1566) is somewhat marred by its author’s Catholic bias and by its incompleteness. It is interesting, however, in that it is somewhat incongruent with other Maya beliefs (Coe

1975: 89), though consistent with contemporary Aztec material. This may reflect regional variation, or perhaps differences between elite and popular conceptions.

The morally good, military heroes, women who die in childbirth, suicides (fetched by suicide goddess Ixtab, with a noose round her neck) and those who die sudden, violent deaths go to paradise. They rest beneath the Yaxche tree, never have to work, and have plenty of food and drink.

Everyone else goes to Metnal, a place of grief and despair, filled with devils and torments of extreme fatigue, cold, and hunger. The god of Metnal was called Hunhau (Landa 1566: 131–2).

Legend of the Suns

The *Legend of the Suns* (recorded 1558) has been described as ‘one of the purest sources of Aztec myth’ (Bierhorst 1992: 7). It includes a creation myth in which Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent sky deity) journeys to the underworld (Mictlan, ‘the emerald realm’) to obtain human bones from the Lord and Lady of the Dead (Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlancihuatl) so that he may start a new race of humans (76:22–6).¹⁰ As in *PV*, the underworld deities play tricks on him, and he must overcome various perils. He finally succeeds in obtaining ‘the precious bones’ (7:35), though falls into a trap – a pit dug by spirits.

The bones are ‘ruined’ by pecking quails, though Quetzacoatl’s ‘double’ (*nahualli*), Xolotl (a guide for the deceased in the afterlife) still takes them to the paradise of Tamoanchan where they are powdered in a jade bowl by Quilaztli, ‘Serpent Woman’. Quetzalcoatl bleeds onto the powder through a wound in his penis, creating the new race through self-sacrifice. A male child grows from the mixture on the fourth day, and a female on the eighth. ‘All the gods did penance’, states the text, giving the names of six gods which are actually epithets of Quetzalcoatl himself, suggesting an attainment of omnipresence. His underworld journey has resulted in a higher state of divinity as a creator god who brought forth life from human remains in the realm of the dead. He also gains transformative powers, changing himself into an ant and, as a fertility deity, bringing maize to the new race (Bierhorst 1984: 19–20).

In another episode Quetzalcoatl buries his father, the sun (i.e. setting in the west), and must fight off the stars so that he may be reborn at dawn. He reaches Tlapallan ('Red Place') at the morning horizon where he dies and is cremated. Cremation 'was of transcendental importance for casting off this mortal coil and transformation of dead warriors into celestial beings of brilliance and beauty' (Taube 2004: 294). Quetzalcoatl is reborn as the Morning Star, in an eternal cycle of transformation and renewal (ibid. 22–24; n.16, 17, 23). According to Séjourné (1957: 59–60), Venus was considered a fragment of the sun. With the deceased associated with Venus, the ultimate goal is to reunite with the sun and return it to its unified state.

Annals of Cuauhtitlan

The mytho-historical *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* (1570) may contain 'revisionist elements', particularly in its emphasis on 'the somewhat Christlike deity, Quetzalcoatl' and its disparagement of other gods (ibid. 3) – though it shows no overt Catholic influence.

One section describes the death and divine transformation of the historical tenth-century Toltec ruler, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, often conflated with the deity Quetzalcoatl. When he refuses to perform human sacrifices (5:9ff.), a sorcerer-deity goes to him and says, 'I've come to show you your flesh' (5:39). Quetzalcoatl replies, 'What is this flesh of mine? Let me see it' (5:42). The sorcerer shows him a mirror and says, 'Know yourself, see yourself'. Quetzalcoatl sees a corpse-like reflection with sunken eyes and a swollen, 'monstrous' face (5:45–6). He is placed in a stone sarcophagus (7:14) for four days, then goes to the celestial ocean (Bierhorst 1984: 36) where he cremates himself (7:27). His ashes ascend in the form of 'precious birds', his heart as a quetzal (colourful native bird). He 'enters the sky, becomes the Morning Star, and after eight days is deified as Lord of the Dawn (7:37).

Quetzalcoatl is apparently already dead when the sorcerer-deity goes to him, though without realizing it. The realization, brought on by the encounter with his own corpse, enables him to proceed and to be reborn into a transformed, divinized state of being.

The text also contains a brief description of heaven as a realm of duality, arranged in nine levels (4:42).

History of the Things of New Spain and Other Spanish Documents

This careful, authoritative ethnography is unique for its time (1547–1569 CE). Sahagun collected his material orally from native elders (primarily priests and nobles), and thus the result is essentially genuine indigenous primary material (Léon-Portilla 1980: 36). The texts are also valuable because they reflect everyday belief, with a focus on how one's status and achievement determines one's afterlife fate, as opposed to transformation and transcendence.

Members of the royalty become immortal and divine, as if they had 'awakened from a dream in which they had lived.... Some became a sun, others the moon, and still others planets' (*HNS* III: 201–10).

Those who are sacrificed or killed in battle are taken by the goddess Teoyaominqui to the House of the Sun, 'a place like a vast open space' with an abundance of mesquite groves, cacti, and maguey (a plant used to make the intoxicating drink, *pulque*). They live a life of wealth, pleasure, happiness, and rejoicing at the daily appearance of the sun – though only those whose shields were pierced in battle may look upon its radiance. In an apparent reference to reincarnation, the deceased will 'once again blossom on earth'. After four years in the House of the Sun, he/she becomes a bird or a butterfly and lives off the nectar of flowers (*ibid.* 79–80, 178–9). Women who die in childbirth also go to this realm. They enter the horizon and escort the sun to the dwellers of Mictlan (Micteca) in a litter made of quetzal feathers. The Micteca then carry the sun into the underworld, and the dead arise (VI: 163).

Those who drown, are struck by lightning, or die of particular illnesses go to Tlalocan, the realm of the rain-god and 'offering-priest' Tlaloc (II: 224–5; *ibid.* 178); and to his 'house of the quetzal plumes'. He is 'bluish green', his face is spotted with soot, and he wears a feathered crown and jade necklace (I: 9). In Tlalocan it is 'eternal spring, never is there withering, forever there is sprouting ...' (*ibid.* 80). It is a place of riches and abundance, with plentiful maize, squash, chillies, amaranth, and other

local produce. Tlaloc is assisted by *tlaloques*, who are ‘like offering priests ... or fire priests ... with long, disordered hair’. The deceased is ‘submerged’ in Tlalocan, despite it being in the sky (VI: 115), and there are further references to the land of the dead being ‘above us, in the heavens’ (VI: 48, 36 etc.). According to the mid-sixteenth-century Codex Vaticanus A (CVA), Tlalocan is located on the moon (Graulich 1990: 166).

As long as they are free from ‘vice’ and ‘filth’, the morally good and the prematurely dead become ‘as precious green stones, as precious turquoises ...’ and dwell in the realm of Tonacatecutli, ‘Lord of Our Flesh’. Tonacatecutli is a title of both the rain god and the supreme Dual God, Ometeuctli. In his realm there are gardens, trees, and flowers full of nectar to feed upon beneath the sacred tree (VI: 115; Léon-Portilla 1980).

Babies and young children live without fear in the House of the Sun, in happiness, peace, and contentment, awaiting ‘the good of heart’. They are cared for by ‘the older sister of the gods’, Chicomecoatli, who helps to settle them ‘beyond’ (ibid. 81; VI: 38). In CVA, young children go to Chichihuacuanco, ‘the Wet-Nurse Tree’, where they feed on an inexhaustible supply of milk (Léon-Portilla 1963: 127; cf. Codex Rios; Furst 1995: 26). Similarly, in *Primeros Memoriales* (the primary Nahuatl texts of Sahagun’s sources) children and babies go to Xochatlalpan (Place of the Abundance of the Water of Flowers) where the tree is described as actually having udders (178).

Everyone else goes north to Mictlan, on a journey which takes four years through the ‘nine places’ of the underworld, which are simultaneously also one place (ibid. 176–7). There is a ‘complete disappearance’ (ibid. 176–7), though since there are various further experiences this seems to mean there will be no return to earth, rather than annihilation. A small yellow dog leads the deceased across nine rivers – dogs of any other colour will refuse. White dogs will claim ‘I have just washed myself’, and black dogs will claim ‘I have just stained myself black’. *PM* (177) tells of a man who, when he died, commanded his dog to wait for him ‘at the edge of the water in the ninth underworld’ so that the dog would carry him across. Perils on the journey include the risk of annihilation ‘where the mountains come together’, ‘the blue lizard’, ‘the road which the serpent watches’, eight deserts and eight hills, and the ‘place of the obsidian-bladed winds’¹¹ (ibid. 175). The underworld is generally so windy that trees, sand, and cacti are blown about (*PM* 177). A

person's diet on earth determines their underworld diet: those who ate tamales¹² must eat foul-smelling underworld equivalents stuffed with beetles; those who ate black bean stew must eat hearts. 'Everything that is not eaten here on earth is eaten there in Mictlan', including 'poisonous herbs' and 'prickly poppies', demonstrating fear of a reversal of the earthly order. Those who wasted grain on earth will have their eyes torn out (López Austin 1988: 112).

Mictlan is sometimes referred to as Ximoayan, 'Place of the Fleshless' – an epithet also used for Tlalocan (*HNS* II: 224–5; III: 41–2; VII: 21). According to Léon-Portilla (1980: 44), this refers to a bodiless, spiritualized state rather than to a state of excarnation (i.e. existence in an animated skeletal form). This is not clear in the texts, in which bones play a prominent role in creation, as seen in the Quetzalcoatl myth above. Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlancihuatl are regularly depicted in skeletal form, as are Cihuacoatl (a death and fertility goddess), Quetzalcoatl, Omiteuctli, and others. According to Fray Andres del Olmos' *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, a Spanish text of the 1530s based on an indigenous work (Haly 1992: 278), Omiteuctli (Bone Lord) is also known as Huitzilopochtli (a sun god often depicted as a mummy-bundle), son of Tonacatecutli and Tonacacihuatl, and brother of Quetzalcoatl and the red and black Tezcatlipocas (manifestations of the androgynous, omnipresent, one-footed god of discord, chaos, and darkness). That Huitzilopochtli assisted Quetzalcoatl in recreating human life from bones of the ancestors (according to the *Historia* [ibid. 281]) is particularly relevant here in light of his depiction as Mictlantecuhtli in Codex Tudela (c.1545; fol. 52), which states that the reason he is fleshless is because he is weak from sacrificing his own health for that of his worshippers (ibid. 283). Codex Boturini (annals dealing with the period 1168–1355) contains a migration myth in which Huitzilopochtli is transformed into the sun god while inside his mummy bundle (Hunt 1977: 68). These skeletal deities radiate *tonalli* – the sun's heat and light and the animating life force found in blood, conceived of as a component of the soul (see below), and originating in Mictlan (Haly 1992: 287). Bones and creation are also etymologically associated, for 'bone marrow' in Nahuatl is related to the word for 'semen'. 1-Hunahpu's first wife (before Blood Moon) was Bone Woman, a maize deity associated with creation (Bessie-Sweet 2000: 5). Mictlantecuhtli was associated with bones and blood in the context of death, but he also used

his power to make bones and blood strong in newly created life. He and Mictlancihuatl are associated with childbirth, depicted in birth scenes (Laud Codex, c. late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries), and invoked in a birth text (Florentine Codex) (Brotherston 1995: 136).

Mictlantecuhtli is also known as 'Tzontemoc the One Who is Descending'. He is referred to as 'our mother, our father' (*HNS* VI: 152, 190 etc.), but also as 'unsatiated, thirsting there for us, panting ...' (VII: 4). In *PM* he and Mictecacihuatl eat severed limbs and beetles, and drink pus from a skull.

When deceased individuals finally meet Mictlantecuhtli, the god gives them all their funerary offerings: pipes, incense, wooden figurines, clothes, fabrics, and so on. After four years, the deceased goes 'to the nine places of the dead, where lay a broad river'.

HNS (VI: 27) also contains a prayer to meet deceased relatives in the land of the dead. The afterlife in general is described as 'our ultimate home, the place of the ... shattering winds, where reside the wind people, the flower people' (6:20; Léon-Portilla 1980: 72). Elsewhere (VI: 171) it is stated that the deceased goes to nourish the sun, suggesting that souls are actually its food (López Austin 1988: 318).

In contrast to *AC*, according to *HNS* (X: 169, 10:29) heaven has 12 levels. These are named in *CVA* as (from lowest to highest) Heaven of the Paradise of the Rain God over (or, 'and') the Moon; Heaven of the Star-Skirted Goddess; Heaven of the Sun; Heaven of the Salt-Fertility Goddess; Heaven of the Fire Drill; Blackish Heaven; Blue Heaven; Where the Stone Slabs Crash Together; White God Place; Yellow God Place; Red God Place; and Place of Duality (Nicholson 1971: table 2). The Lord and Lady of Duality, Ometeuctli and Omecihuatl, dwell at the uppermost level, also called Place of Bones (Omeyocan). Ometeuctli is described as 'He who dwells in waters the colour of the bluebird, he who dwells in the clouds. The old god, he who inhabits the shadows of the land of the dead, the lord of fire and of time' (Léon-Portilla 1980: 201).

In a myth reminiscent of *AC*, after realizing his own death when he looks in a mirror, Quetzalcoatl builds a bridge in order to cross a river. He reaches the Water of the Serpent where he is challenged and interrogated by sorcerers regarding where he is going and why. He explains that he has been summoned by the sun to Tlapallan. Before allowing him to pass, the sorcerers make Quetzalcoatl give up his worldly goods. Continuing on the

journey, he is accompanied by an entourage of dwarfs and hunchbacks, though they all die of cold when it snows as they pass between mountains. Quetzalcoatl reaches Tlalocan where he shoots an arrow through the World Tree, and passes through the hole it makes (symbolic of rebirth). It leads north, where 'he built a house underground ... called Mictlan' (*HNS* III: 2–6; *ibid.* 62). As Quetzalcoatl originated first in 'the place from which the sun arose ... Tlalocan', and second from 'Mictlampa', a wind from the land of the dead (VII: 14), he is returning to his origin-points.

In *Histoyre du Mechique*, a 1547 French translation of a lost indigenous text, Quetzalcoatl is referred to as Yohualtecuhli who was both the Evening Star and the sun at night. He is also identified as a *Tzitzimitl* – a deified soul of a warrior who has become a star. *Tzitzimime* (plural) were guardians of the sun and moon, described as dwarfs with long, wild hair – similar to Tlaloc and his priests (*Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*; Graulich 1990: 172). Of ambiguous gender – perhaps androgynous – Klein (1975: 78) once called them 'great stellar night lords of the underworld', though later (1995: 255; cf. 2000) referred to them as 'largely female' and stressed their association with Cihuacoatl. An illustration in Codex Magliabechiano depicts a *Tzitzimitl* similarly to Cihuacoatl: a skeletal figure wearing a shellbordered skirt, decorated with human organs and limbs, and a sacrificial knife for a tongue (*ibid.* 258–9). However, the claws, wild hairstyle, and tail are not part of Cihuacoatl's iconography; nor is the apparently phallic snake emerging from between the *Tzitzimitl*'s legs, suggesting a hermaphroditic figure.¹³ The association both with the stars and with the underworld, and with birth and death, also suggests a being which combines and reconciles opposite principles.

Diego Durán's sources (1570s) for his *History of the Indies of New Spain* summarized the Aztec afterlife as 'the place where you will find your parents, relatives, and lords, your forefathers, where, like a small bird that soars, you have gone to enjoy the Lord of Creation.... resting in the shadow of the gloomy meadows of the nine mouths of death, and in the sun's house of resplendent light, where your ancestors are' (López Austin 1988: 330).

Mexica and Aztec Poetry and Songs

In the ‘Song of Tlaloc’ (6) (from *Twenty Sacred Hymns* in *PM*, believed to have been composed hundreds of years before the Spanish conquest [Léon-Portilla 1980: 191, n.1; 55]), there is a reference to ‘arising’ in the afterlife after being dead for four years. It states that ‘In the place of the fleshless, the house of quetzal feathers, is the transformation; it is the act of the Propagator of Men’.¹⁴

Some pre-conquest songs were also recorded in *Cantares Mexicanos* during the second half of the sixteenth century,¹⁵ and are marked by an uncertainty and doubt regarding the afterlife, absent from other texts. Léon-Portilla (1980: 44, 57) suggests that this reveals a difference between the ‘official’ conceptions of Tlalocan and Mictlan, and the personal perspectives of the poems’ authors. A song dating to the mid-fifteenth century contains a reference to an afterlife realm called Quenonamican (‘Where-In-Some-WayOne-Lives’). The author questions whether, like earth, it is a ‘region of the fleeting moment’, if there are flowers and songs, and if happiness and friendship are possible (Bierhorst 1985: 251, 258–9). Another asks, ‘Where is the source of light, since that which gives life hides itself ...? How many can truthfully say that truth is or is not there?’ (ibid. 181). The land of the dead is referred to as ‘the place of our downfall’, and the authors question whether they will see their mothers and fathers there (XVIII: 30). They wonder how to find the God of Duality: ‘Is his home in the place of the fleshless? In the innermost heaven?’ (ibid. 184). Elsewhere the poet wonders about reincarnation – if one will return as mist, as a dove, as an ear of corn (XVIII: 30).

Other songs exhibit more optimism and certainty: ‘We only came to be born, indeed our home is beyond, where all are shorn, where life is infinite, where things never end’ (III: 5). ‘Reality’ lies in the afterlife, a place of happiness, and the true ‘abode of life’ (ibid. 186) where one never dies. Another song relates a vision of family members in the land of the dead (LXXXVIc: 18).

In Tamoanchan is ‘the tree of flowers’ (XVIII: 50), and people are clothed in flowers (V: 3). It is ‘the singing place’, and ‘the life-giver’s home’ (V: 2); ‘There alone is happiness’ (XVI: 2), and ‘he who has died, he becomes a god’ (Léon-Portilla 1980: 187). Birds take the deceased to a valley filled with flowers in a ‘sunstruck mistbow’ (I: 4). He/she becomes ‘a swan of green places’ among other swans and singing birds (II: 1, 2;

XVII: 44). Tamoanchan is also described as ‘eternal shore’, ‘water’s midst’, ‘house of dawn’, ‘house of colours’, ‘land of fire’, ‘land of spirit becoming’, ‘origin’, ‘our coming-out place’, ‘hummingbird mountain’, and ‘cavern house of flowers’ (LXXXVIc: 40; IX: 11) – the latter suggesting an underworld in the sky. According to López Austin (1997: 270), Tamoanchan is the World Tree. Its roots are Tlalocan ‘which forms the world of the dead, from which the generative force emerges’, and rest of the tree is in the celestial realm. Its ‘branches of light and fire’ make the House of the Sun, where souls in the form of birds rest. The deceased are referred to as ‘sky-dwellers’ (II: 5).

There are nine fields of the underworld, and a city in which live ‘dwellers among the nine’ at the western horizon (LIVb: 5, 7) where the sun journeys nightly into the realm ‘where rattlesnakes are’ (LIVb: 3–4). Other underworld locales are ‘cavern house’, ‘jade house’, and Plume Town which is inhabited by a deity called Cave Dweller (LIVc: 6; LXXXVIc: 40).

Mictlan is referred to as ‘where we’re all destroyed’ (XVIII: 6), and ‘Smoker’s home, the Arbiter, Father Keeper of the Waters’ (LXIXc: 25). Souls there are ‘in precious snares, they’re weeping at the sacred shore’ (LXXXIIIa: 1).

Summary and Conclusions

The varying and complex Mesoamerican afterlife conceptions have been variously interpreted. López Austin (1988: 318) asserts that they can be explained by the belief that the soul is composed of different components. One may go to the sky, while another goes to the underworld. However, for the modern Nahua, the same component (the *teyolia*) goes to Mictlan, Tlalocan, the House of the Sun, and/or Chichihuacuauhco, and/or becomes a bird or butterfly. The other two do not appear to be conscious: the *tonalli* (as referred to above), the fate of which is obscure; and the *ihiyotl*, the shadow or the negative residue of one’s personality which dissipates as a foul gas (Furst 1995: 177). The *teyolia*, therefore, must be the sole component which retains consciousness and the capacity for continuing experience.

More intriguing (though ultimately speculative) is López Austin's (1997: 194) alternative suggestion that references to reincarnation indicate an afterlife process of 'recycling'. The soul undergoes 'a purification' through intermediate states to remove the sins and impurities acquired on earth, then is returned 'to its original state' as a 'totally cleansed and depersonalized force' before being reincarnated (ibid. 265).

Whatever the case, a series of intermediate states or experiences is clear from the texts; and the association of the deceased with multiple interconnected gods, and his or her multiple transformations (melons, birds, butterflies, jaguars, the sun, Venus, stars) also suggests multiple simultaneous experiences, omnipresence, and transcendence. The death and rebirth of the deceased is associated with Venus in *PV*, and in *LS*, *AC*, *HNS* and *PM* where the rebirth of the human race, of Quetzalcoatl, and the deceased who go to Mictlan correspond to the number of days Venus takes to pass through the underworld (4) and return (8) (Bierhorst 1984: 81, n.48; 37); though there is also a stronger solar emphasis in *HNS* and *CM*. The association of heavenly realms and deities with their underworld counterparts, and of creation and rebirth with death, further suggests an ultimate divine union and omnipresence. There are also differing conceptions of the same realms: Xibalba in *PV* is a place of both positive and negative experiences, as is Mictlan in *LS*, *HINS*, and *HNS* (which itself embodies numerous different conceptions); though Mictlan is wholly negative in *CM*. Even when Mictlan is positive, however, it is generally less desirable than Tlalocan or Tamoanchan.

There has also been some debate regarding judgement and morally determined afterlife fates in Mesoamerica (Graulich 1990: 180). It is true that the *process* of judgement is not generally explicit in these texts, though this is likely one function of the Council of Xibalba in *PV*. Although the Twins are tested not for their virtue but for their knowledge and ingenuity, an afterlife based on judgement of some kind is clear in *PV*, and in the reports of de Landa and Sahagun which are more clearly morally determined. It is also implied in all the material by the very presence of underworld threats and demons, which presumably only those of moral/social/intellectual/religious worth can survive.

In *RCY* and *HNS* – both non-literary, ethnographic sources – there is also evidence that Maya and Aztec judgement was pre-mortem, with one's fate determined by social position and/or mode of death; and a correlation

between earthly glory and afterlife enlightenment. Because it is *right* and *moral* to be a warrior, to bear children and so on, one wins a favourable afterlife. As for mode of death, this is decided by the gods based upon one's moral behaviour, purity, and valour – thus ensuring that everyone gets the afterlife they deserve (López Austin 1988: 337). Thus, the 'pure' who die in battle or who are sacrificed are pure because they did so; and the good of heart are struck by lightning in order to ensure they go to Tlalocan. That suicides go to paradise in *RCY* demonstrates only that attitudes towards suicide are culturally embedded. Furthermore, both *RCY* and *HNS* clearly specify favourable fates for the morally good. According to Spanish sources, the Aztec confessed their sins before they died, indicating fear of afterlife retribution based on earthly behaviour (Graulich 1990: 180).

Despite the long spans of time and the cultural differences between the Maya and Aztec, the texts reveal numerous common afterlife motifs: the association of the circuit of the sun and Venus with the ascent and descent of the spirit; fertility and agricultural parallels, and life emerging from realms of the dead; encounters with human remains in the context of transformation/rebirth; meeting deceased relatives, ancestors, and divinities who radiate light; interrogation and perils, and the reliance on knowledge or wisdom to survive them; divine omnipresence and multiple transcendent, transformational experiences.

Part Three

Universalism and Culture-Specificity: An Interdisciplinary Approach

Chapter 9

Analysis of Similarities and Differences

To some extent, the summaries at the end of each of the preceding five chapters serve to highlight the main similarities between conceptions in each civilization and the NDE. It would be a logistical impossibility to discuss each and every similarity and dissimilarity, and there is neither space nor reason to do so. Of relevance here are the most frequently recurring similarities; and the most significant dissimilarities. If discussion is weighted towards the former, it is partly because the phenomenological approach taken above has made the numerous dissimilarities apparent. More importantly, as discussed in [Chapter 1](#), the vastness of differences makes the similarities of special significance: their very existence requires explanation, while differences are to be expected. It should also be pointed out that there are conceivably equally as many dissimilarities between the texts of a single civilization as there are across cultures and experiences (e.g. the loss of a stellar afterlife in *CT*, the changing character and function of Yamaloka from the *RV* to the *Up.*; the afterlife relocations under Emperor Wu).

As seen in the above chapters, on a thematic level all traditions discussed here include elements typical of NDE reports,¹ including descriptions of leaving the body and existing in non-physical or quasi-physical form, journeys to other realms seen as a return to the origin-point or ‘home,’ experiences of both darkness and light, meeting deceased relatives, judgement/evaluation of one’s earthly conduct and an afterlife fate determined by the outcome, encounters with deities and/or other beings associated with light, obstacles or barriers, and a sense of joy, harmony, and/or oneness involving divinization or the association/union of the self with the divine or ‘Ultimate Reality’.

Some less obvious, though highly significant further correlations can also be made. OBE reports describe rising from the body and perspectives

from above, recalling the repeated references to ascent in the ancient texts. It is also paralleled in the texts by the recurring theme of encountering one's own corpse. Furthermore, as in the NDE, the encounter is frequently associated with the realization that the individual has survived physical death. A related motif is that of deceased gods, which often serves to associate the individual with the divine. In all cases, however, renewal or rebirth is the central theme. In Egypt it is the moment when the deceased finds the corpse of Osiris in Rosetau. Because the deceased is Osiris, he/she is thus encountering his/her own corpse, an encounter characterized as the revelation of a 'secret' which explicitly causes the true realization of death and immortality which enables the deceased to proceed (*CT* IV.95). In Mesopotamia, Damu's knowledge that beer is being made from his congealed blood in order to facilitate his rebirth makes him realize he is dead (*Des.*). Enkidu's graphic characterization of the body as an 'old garment the lice devour' (*BEU* XII.97) precedes his revelations to Bilgames about the nature of the afterlife. Inana's transformation into a corpse and subsequent 'rebirth' may also be relevant here; as might the concept of the divine element in humans being the flesh of a slaughtered god in *Atrahasis*. The OBE is explicit in India (e.g. 'shaking off the body' in the *JB*; 'rising up from the body' in *CU*), as is the stress on the realization of one's true immortal nature; and the motif is therefore less pronounced. The Decay found in the 'house infernal' in the *AV* is relevant, however: Panikkar (1977: 616) has related it to the Vedic principle of 'cosmic disintegration', that 'deep within' death and decay is found 'the seed of immortality'. In China, the corpses of divinized humans at Mt. Kunlun are a recurring theme, where shamans gather around the corpse of the god Notch Flaw, who holds the drug of immortality (*Shj*). There are also explicit references to OBE (*Dao de jing*; *Zhuangzi*). In Mesoamerica, each of the multiple deaths of the Twins in *PV* leads to a rebirth. When the Twin sons find their father(s) (both pairs of twins being inter-associated) buried in the underworld, they resurrect him and they themselves are divinized and ascend to the divine realm. The theme is even clearer in *AC* and *HNS* when Quetzalcoatl realizes he is dead when he sees his own corpse reflected in the mirror, which facilitates his progression to divine rebirth. The numerous links between bones and creation are also relevant here: human remains bringing about life and rebirth. The revulsion often expressed by NDErs at the sight of their own body and the prospect of

returning to it (e.g. Moody 1975: 40–1) is also thematically similar to the graphic descriptions of the fates of corpses in the texts. It is also worth mentioning the recurring shamanic motif of transformation through the death or dismemberment of the body in afterlife realms (Kalweit 1984: 104ff.).

The NDE corpse encounter differs from those in the texts in that the OBE takes place in this world when the soul leaves the body, as opposed to in an afterlife realm. It is conceptually analogous, however, if we allow for a mythologizing of the concept, particularly considering that both carry similar meanings: the realization of one's own physical death also being the realization of the survival and transcendence of death (i.e. of immortality), and the means of proceeding into a new spiritualized state of being.

The corpse motif also recalls the Egyptian belief that the *ba* visited the body in the tomb each night in order to sustain the powers of rebirth. This may also be a reflection of the 'return' element of the NDE, though logically speaking this element is presupposed in the texts by their very existence. Within their cultural contexts, writings purporting to reveal what happens in the afterlife are likely believed to have originated with someone who had been there and returned. The returning *ba*, in any case, does not reanimate the body or remain in it, which is inconsistent with NDE returns. The 'return' motif occurs more clearly in Chinese poems (*Cci*), including where the spirit is told by the sun to 'turn back' (though this may be in a shamanic context). The fact that the return is reluctant is also consistent with NDE reports. Only in China is a fear of mistaken identity overtly expressed,² and it is significant that this is also the most usual reason for return given in Chinese NDE testimonies. In Mesopotamia, a return to the body is a key element in *DB*. The lack of the theme in the Indian and Mesoamerican texts may be because there was no context for them to be expressed: they are not concerned with the relationship between the body and the fate of the soul. Also consistent with NDE reports are indications in all the texts that one has a spiritual 'body' of some kind, as opposed to being pure disembodied consciousness (e.g. references to the deceased being clothed, the need for nourishment, the possibility of 'physical' intimacy, etc.).

In all traditions knowledge and enlightenment in general are repeatedly seen as prerequisites for immortality and/or a positive afterlife. Some

examples are the efflux of Osiris which is contained in ‘the word’ (*CT* 1087), which makes one immortal. Those who know the *Book of Two Ways* become like Re and Osiris, invulnerable and immortal in ‘the circle of fire’ (VII.471). Bilgames obtained secret knowledge from Ziusudra; and Etana hoped for revelations of what is ‘hidden’ in the spiritual realm. In India, the deceased eludes going to a hellish realm by means of ‘the divine word’ (AV VIII.1.3); ‘the one who knows’ attains liberation (*BU* VI.2.1); and the afterlife journeys of Bhrgu are undertaken for the attainment of knowledge (*SB*, *JB*). In China, the afterlife is a place to obtain ‘understanding’ and ‘self-knowledge’ (*Cci*). In Mesoamerica, the tests the Twins undergo are related to knowledge and ingenuity; and the transformed head of 1/7-Hunapu imparts the knowledge of spiritual immortality to Blood Moon (*PV*).

Evaluation of knowledge/enlightenment is expressed in the theme of interrogation which occurs in all traditions, though is not typical of the NDE. Those who do not show the requisite understanding of the association of death with rebirth, and/or of the true spiritual nature of the self, cannot progress and risk annihilation. Knowing names, the changing of clothes, and/or being stripped naked also recur in this context. In Egypt the interrogations relate to the name, purity, and divinity of the deceased, who is warned not to reveal his/her divine identity; though only by revealing one’s (presumably) earthly identity can the gates of Horus and Osiris be passed. He/she is given ‘dazzling’ new clothes as a symbol of spiritual rebirth (*Pyr.*). In *CT* the questions regard how many fingers one has and what one will eat; the deceased forgets his/her name³ at the risk of face mutilation; and there is a threat from an entity called ‘Name-Repeater’. In Mesopotamia, Inana is interrogated with the question ‘Who are you?’ Though her reply is not particularly philosophical, her subsequent undressing may refer to the shedding of the earthly, enculturated aspects of the self, and a return to the original birth state – particularly considering that many of the accoutrements are of a priestly and royal nature (Sladek 1974: 84). This stripping is a precondition for her admittance to the underworld. Dumuzid is stripped naked in *DG* before Utu causes his transformation. Gilgamesh is questioned by the Scorpion People about his identity and destination, and is allowed to pass when he tells them he is seeking immortality. When he reaches Dilmun, he is bathed and given new clothes. In the *Up.* and *JB* the deceased is also asked

‘Who are you?’, and the answer demonstrates a knowledge of *brahman*. The wrong answer is to give one’s name, which demonstrates lack of awareness of one’s true divine nature. In the Chinese ‘Ballad of Tung Flees’, the spirit is asked what he/she seeks, and when the answer is ‘the holy way’ and ‘a long life’, he/she is given the means to divinization. A ‘cloud coat’, silk robes, and the like are also given to the spirit in other poems; and in *Zhuangzi* he is called ‘Nameless Man’. In Mesoamerica (PV), the Twins are asked their identity and origins by the underworld Lords. Though their claim of ignorance may have been a ruse to deceive the Lords, it could also reflect loss of ego, or a new state of consciousness in which relations to earthly social identifiers are irrelevant, perhaps reflected in their being dressed as vagabonds. Regardless, knowing the names of the Lords gives them power. Asking their father to name the parts of his face also emphasizes identity and self-knowledge. Failure of the test meant that 1/7-Hunapu had to remain in the underworld while the twins ascended to the heavens. The same ideas apply to Quetzalcoatl who is allowed to pass the interrogating sorcerers only when he sheds his worldly goods and tells them that he is seeking the sun (HNS). The corpseencounter motif is again significant here, in relation to the attainment of spiritual progression as a result of self-knowledge.

The life review is a key feature of the NDE, and is clearly evident in Egyptian autobiographical texts, in the *Teaching for King Merikare*, in the deceased’s ‘annals’ being read before the gods (Pyr.), and various confessional/negative-confessional passages. In the Sumerian ‘A man and his god’, the deceased declares his sins before the god; and in *DB* the gods review Bilgames’ life. In India, a clear life review occurs in *Kau*. The theme is not explicit in the Chinese or Mesoamerican texts,⁴ and in the latter the process of judgement is not described. The fact that the NDE life review/assessment is made by the self (with support from a being of light) is reflected by the transformation of the deceased into an afterlife judge. This is particularly apparent in Egypt where the deceased becomes Osiris, and in Mesopotamia when Bilgames and Ur-Namma become underworld judges; and perhaps where Inana is referred to as an Anuna god – that is, one of the gods who judged her. In India, the deceased ‘unites’ with Yama. Though apparently absent in the Mesoamerican material, self-judgement possibly occurs in the Chinese poem ‘*Qi Jian*’ when the spirit states that

his own knowledge of his acts being ‘faultless’ would enable his happiness.

In most cases, conduct evaluation/judgement is associated with a deity or being of light, as in the NDE. In Egypt, the merging of Osiris-Re equates a divinity of light with one of judgement. In Mesopotamia, Enki and Utu radiate light as they judge the dead. In India, the seasons descend on rays of light to interrogate the deceased. The connection between light and judgement is less apparent in China where there are no descriptions of Shangdi’s appearance, though the fact that he is a heavenly deity may suggest a radiant appearance. Aztec underworld deities radiate light, and death is ‘a way for the light to show itself’ in *PV*. The dead themselves also become beings of light (often as stars) in all traditions with the possible exception of Mesopotamia where, nevertheless, names of deceased rulers are written with a ‘star’ determinative.

Neither the NDE reports nor our texts claim a simple dual heaven-or-hell afterlife, but rather multiple experiences and intermediate states,⁵ and a progression to an ultimate, transcendental state. As has been discussed, attempts to explain such multiple experiences in either/or linear terms have been unsuccessful. In the sixteenth century, Durán understood the multivalency of Aztec afterlife: ‘where, like a small bird that soars, you have gone to enjoy the Lord of Creation.... resting in the shadow of the gloomy meadows of the nine mouths of death, *and*⁶ in the sun’s house of resplendent light, where your ancestors are’ (López Austin 1988: 330). He did not force his Catholic worldview upon the belief by presenting it as *either* the ‘sun’s house’ *or* the ‘gloomy meadows’, but allowed for a belief in *both* states, either alternately or simultaneously. Gates feature in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Chinese texts; while solar and lunar doorways occur in the *Up.*, and different houses are passed through in *PV*, indicating a succession of experiences thematically paralleled in the NDE.

The afterlife is generally described in the texts as an idealized mirror-image of earth, or in the case of more negative realms as a reversal of the earthly order. Both types are characterized by social hierarchies and earthly ‘physical’ features and institutions, including lands of plenitude and abundance such as the Egyptian Marsh of Reeds, Mesopotamian Dilmun, the *RV* ‘pasture’, the celestial fields in the Chinese poetry, and the nine fields of the underworld in the Aztec poetry; and conversely threatening creatures such as snakes, and perils such as rivers. NDE

reports rarely describe realms of transcendent pastoral beauty before they ‘return’.

Afterlife perils in all traditions include water-crossings, serpents, demons, fire, and abysses. Differences of specific perils are too vast to enumerate – for example, female apes who sever heads (*CT*); not being allowed to sleep (*Des.*); a river of blood (*SB*); giant ants (*Cci*); and obsidian-bladed winds (*PM*), to name only a very few. Nevertheless, non-existence or annihilation is the ultimate negative fate in all traditions.⁷ A reversal of the earthly order is a common fear in Egyptian spells against being upside-down, being hunted with nets, and the reversal of the digestion process; in the Vedic warning that the deceased will be consumed by the food he/she has eaten (*Up.*); and in Mesoamerica where food and drink cry out (*CBC*).

NDEs do not typically mention demons, tortures, or perils (though examples of negative or partly negative NDEs do exist). Because negative experiences are (a) unusual and (b) not generally consistent with each other, no specifically negative cross-cultural NDE feature is identifiable (as opposed to phenomenologically similar elements experienced in either positive or negative ways, e.g. entering darkness).

It should be kept in mind that NDErs primarily describe the afterlife *journey*, while the texts concern the journey as well as subsequent events. Significantly, the differences between the texts are mainly culture-specific details of the journey (e.g. modes of ascent), or elements which are mostly irrelevant to the NDE as they do not concern the journey. In addition, not all elements of the NDE are relevant to these religious and mythological works, because there is no explicit context for their expression. Distinguishing between ‘mythological’ and ‘historical’ individuals is irrelevant, or even conceptually incoherent; and there are no first-person narratives regarding the dying experience. Such elements include ineffability, hearing a doctor or some other person discuss one’s death (though see Damu in *Des.*), the ‘fruits’ of the NDE following the return to the body (though spiritual renewal is a common feature), and visions of the future. The latter are nevertheless conceptually consistent with the notion of the afterlife realm as a place of attainment of secret knowledge (and in any case, are rare in NDEs). Other than perhaps the reference to ten days passing in seven in *DU*, it is also not clear in the texts that the deceased has feelings of an acceleration of time and thought; though this

may be suggested by the intensity and detailed complexity of imagery and concept. Nor do the texts generally involve the deceased *choosing* his/her fate (reincarnation, proceeding to another level, returning to the body) as is sometimes reported in NDEs, though divinization and references to wandering at will in multiple realms, elements, and celestial bodies presuppose such an ability.

Also absent from the texts is a crashing or buzzing noise (music features in India, China, and Mesoamerica); and the much-debated tunnel experience. The paths and some rivers/canals, however, may be conceptually equated with the tunnel in that they all function to get the spirit from one place to another. Furthermore, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#), a ‘tunnel’ as such (i.e. as opposed to experiences of emerging from darkness into light, or of locomotion in general), is rare and many NDE researchers no longer regard it as a defining element. The passage of the sun and other celestial bodies through the darkness of the netherworld also suggests the notion of a light emerging from darkness;⁸ and the individual travelling from an underworld to a celestial realm filled with light is common. The NDE sensation of falling or rushing through darkness is paralleled by references to falling or being thrown into darkness and pits in the *RV*; ‘turning and revolving’ in *Zh.*; falling into the netherworld in *BEU.*; and indeed to descent, ascent, and flying in all the civilizations. The soul is associated with birds (and specifically swans) in Egypt, India, China, and Mesoamerica, though the motif is uncertain for Mesopotamia.

Specific underworlds and celestial worlds are not typical of NDEs as they are of the texts, though neither are characterized by dichotomous positive realms associated with height, the sun, joy, and wish-fulfilment; and negative realms associated with depths, darkness, and torment. The underworld is often interconnected with the celestial world, sometimes even located within it, illuminated by the sun during night on earth, or by a sun of its own. It is a place of transformation, renewal, creation, life-giving waters, and deities associated with fertility and rebirth (cf. Kristensen 1960: 125). The celestial/underworld associations in the texts seem to relate to an underlying pantheistic principle common to all the conceptions, and is related to the common themes of transcendence and omnipresence resulting from divinization. This is exemplified in all traditions by multiple transformations (e.g. stars and other celestial bodies, birds, animals, elements, concepts), divinizations, and freedom of

movement; and more specifically by the merging of the *ba* and *ka* as a microcosm of that of Osiris and Re; the divine origins of the soul in *Atrahasis*, and the omnipresence of Damu (in the winds, lighting, tornadoes, etc.); the identification of *atman* with *brahman*, and the soul as microcosm of the sun; ‘universal oneness’ in Wenzi, endlessly wandering the cosmos in *Zh* and in the Chinese poetry (strikingly paralleled in the *Up.*); the Aztec idea of Venus/the soul as fragment of the sun, and union of the Twins and Quetzalcoatl with the celestial, the earthly, the upper world and the lower world.

The recurring theme of the reconciliation of opposites is also relevant here: for example, Osiris-Re, Inana and Ershekigala, Shangdi and Yo Pei, Mictlantecuhtli and Ometeuctli, the soul having more than one element, and the prominence of pairs and duality. Two is the most frequently occurring number throughout all the civilizations (e.g. pairs of deities, paths, rivers, realms etc.), and likely has to do with the concept of transcending duality. The afterlife is both in the sky and in the underworld, and it is both the *source* of all life and the *destination* of all life. The realm of death is also the realm of renewal, for death without rebirth is against nature – against the cycles of the sun, the seasons, and the earth. Osiris, the Anuna, Dumizid, Shangdi, and Tlaloc all have fertility/afterlife/rebirth associations, and 1-Death and 7-Death are counterparts to the fertility deity 1-Hunahpu and his twin 7-Hunahpu. Osiris, Bilgames, Ningishzida, Yama, and the *PV* twins are underworld deities with celestial associations (who also survived their own deaths to become lords or judges of the underworld), as are Yo Pei and Shangdi. While these transformations are not specifically typical of the NDE, they are thematically consistent with reports of feelings of transcendence and feeling ‘at one’ with the divine. Kristensen (1960: 338) observed that ‘totality is always linked with death and the realm of the dead’. Similarly, while literally becoming a god is not typical of the NDE literature, one is transformed into a spiritualized state with god-like abilities including universal understanding, clairvoyance, telepathic communication, and movement through the power of thought. There is also the common concept of continuity of identity and selfhood despite transfiguration and transcendence.

The soul was conceived of as being divided into components in Egypt (the *ba* and *ka*), India (the *asu* and *prana* in the *Upanishads* and *Brahmanas*; Bodewitz 1991: 40ff.), China (the *hun* and *po*, and later *xian*),

and Mesoamerica (the *teyolia*, *tonalli* and *ihiyotl*); though not in Mesopotamia. The concept recalls occasional NDE reports involving dual-consciousness, such as one from 1937 in which the individual stated, ‘my consciousness separated from another consciousness which was also me’ (Audette 1982: 33).

The significance of particular numbers varies, though seven and nine are particularly prominent. In Egypt there are the nine gods of the Ennead, and seven rooms, gates, and ferrymen in the underworld (*CT*). There are seven gates in Mesopotamia, seven adornments of Inana, seven Anuna gods, seven underworld deputies (‘Most bitter cry’) and porters (*DU*), and Bilgames waits seven days before seeking to rescue Enkidu. In China, there are nine entrances to heaven (*Hnz*), a nine-headed serpent, a ‘man with nine heads that can pull up nine-hundred trees’, the ‘nine-coiled’ Yo Pei, nine heavens, rivers, shores, (*Cci*), wells, gates, parts of the sky, and so on (*Shj*). However, there are almost as many instances of the number four in China, and three is also frequently recurrent. In Mesoamerica there are nine underworlds with corresponding deities (*CBC*), nine heavens (*AC*, in contradiction to *CBC* which states there are thirteen), nine rivers (*HNS*), fields (*CM*), and ‘mouths of death’ (*HINS*). Four is almost as prominent; as is eight. In India, the recurring numbers are five and three: there are five heavenly rivers of lotuses (*JB*), and five doorkeepers of heaven (*CU*); but Naraka is ‘below the three earths’ (*RV*), there are three realms of the afterlife (in the *SB*; though six in the *Up.*), one’s merits split into three parts (*JB*), and Naciketas is granted three boons by Yama (*KU*). The prominence of nine is likely due to an association with birth/rebirth in analogy with the human gestation period (López Austin 1997: 262). While Kristensen (1960: 162) wrote that seven suggests ‘totality’ it is unclear why the number would be any more inherently symbolic of totality than, say, three – particularly when applied cross-culturally. Specifying quantity in general may sometimes have had more to do with attempts at verisimilitude rather than with metaphysical import; though the more frequently a number occurs the more significance it likely had.

Numerous further elements are shared between only some of the traditions, and do not occur in NDE reports. The analogous concepts of *Maat*, *Me*, *Rta*, *Tien* are important in areas of judgement and the role of the deceased in maintaining cosmic order; though there is no Mesoamerican counterpart. Only in Mesopotamia, China, and to a lesser

extent Mesoamerica are afterlife realms seen as mountains (and in the first two they link the heavenly and underworld realms). The ferryman is a key motif in Egypt and Mesopotamia, but is lacking in Vedic, Chinese, and Mesoamerican texts (though all have river crossings). Re's bark and rowers are comparable to the charioteer of the sun-god in Mesopotamia, India (Savitir), China (Xi He), and Venus as the 'sun-carrier' in Mesoamerica (*PV*). Though there is often a specific afterlife for soldiers who die in battle, only in Mesoamerica is it overtly preferential. In *Hnz* they become ghosts, and in *DU* they are given to Ur-Namma.

The direction of the afterlife realm is often west, though this is inconsistent despite common associations between death and the setting sun. In Egypt it is east in *Pyr.*, though west in *CT*. In Mesopotamia it appears to have been east (according to a single reference in *In.*), while China alternates between east and west. The Vedic worlds of the Gods and Fathers are north-east and south-east, respectively. In Mesoamerica it is usually west, but also north and south. This lack of agreement, even within a single civilization, may be due to the conceptual tension of trying to situate a supernatural and/or non-physical realm which cannot be 'located' anywhere in relation to earth. Russell (1997: 12) has argued that references to afterlife 'space' and 'time' are really 'ontological metaphors referring to something beyond the limits of the human mind'.

In Egypt, a ferry boat is described as being green, the deceased becomes a green swan, and Osiris is depicted as having green skin. In China, immortal Daoists have green feathers in *Cci*, which also features green dragons. There is a Maya green path and Green Road (*PV*), Tlaloc is described as being 'bluish green' (*HNS*), Mictlan is the 'emerald realm' (*LS*), and the deceased becomes a 'swan of green places' (*CM*). The symbolism of the colour is clearly related to the concept of the underworld being a place of fertility and rebirth; though it is absent in Mesopotamia and India which also share such associations.

As well as component-souls, other motifs occur in all civilizations but Mesopotamia, including the association of the Milky Way with heavenly realms, and the lotus/water-lily as a symbol of rebirth. Canines with dual guard/guide functions are found in Egypt (Anubis) and India (Shyama and Shabala). Dog sacrifices in Shang burials and paintings of dogs in Han tombs suggest a parallel in China. In the Aztec afterlife the deceased is guided by a yellow dog, and assisted by the dog-deity Xolotl.

Further motifs are sometimes paired in two civilizations, particularly Egypt and India. The Vedic two paths, for example, recall the Egyptian Two Ways. More strikingly because it is so highly specific, Re's sun-boat and the heavenly boat in the *SB* both undergo 'member apotheosis' – as do Brahma's throne, Re, and the Egyptian deceased. The Sisterly Companions who try to seduce the deceased yet threaten to mutilate him/her (*CT*) are comparable to Faith and Nonfaith in the *SB* and the *Up*. (Inana and Ereshkigala are sisters, though they are not portrayed as a pair). Yama was the son of the sun, as was the Egyptian king who becomes Osiris in death, demonstrating an association between the Lord of the Dead (Yama/Osiris) and the 'son of the sun' in both traditions.

Nourishment in the afterlife was a major concern in Egypt and Mesopotamia, though was peripheral to the others. The deceased becomes food for gods in India (*PU* V.4.4), and for the sun in Mesoamerica (*HNS*). Giant tree-barley features in Egypt (*CT*) and China (*Shj*); owls, bats, and leopards in China and Mesoamerica. The latter two also share with Mesopotamia the concept of female earth/underworld deities (Queen Mother of the West; Tlaltecuhltli, Tlazoltéotl; Ereshkigala). The association between a ball-game and the underworld occurs in *BEU* and *PV*.

Reincarnation is explicit only in the Indian texts, as the terminal stage for the 'present' personality: the *atman* will continue to try to achieve *moksha* in subsequent incarnations. More significant here is that the idea of intermediate states, and the types of experiences undergone in them, are broadly consistent with the other traditions.

Conclusions

Additional parallels could surely be identified, and certainly more divergences. What is clear from those discussed here is that the more detailed and specific a theme or idea is, the less it recurs cross-culturally; or to put it another way, there is a greater instance of thematic than specific correlations. This is consistent with Driver's (1974: 44) comparison of shared cultural traits in historically connected cultures, in which he found that 'progressive dividing of concepts ... into more and

more types tends to lower correlations of individual alloforms' (cf. Eliade 1959: 104).

Trigger (1993: 86) expected to find that the greatest cross-cultural similarities between early civilizations would be those relating to subsistence, the economy, and kinship organization; and that the fewest similarities would be in the realm of religion. This was due to his presuppositions regarding the 'inflexibility of natural laws which restrict human behaviour' on the one hand, and 'the relative freedom of the human imagination' on the other. However, he actually found the opposite of what he expected: symbols varied, as did mode and style of expression, and 'cultural values', but there was 'a basic uniformity of religious beliefs shared by all seven civilizations' in his sample. He also found overall that these similarities occurred more 'at the general, structural level', and the differences on a more specific level (ibid. 109).

Lévi-Strauss (1963: 210–12) used the term 'mythemes' to describe the thematic elements of a myth which are combined to form its overall 'structure'. For example, if the structure is a journey to an afterlife realm, elements such as ascent, judgement, and annihilation are mythemes. The mytheme is analogous to Doniger's (1998: 88ff.) 'micromyths'⁹: components of a myth which contain 'intrinsic meaning that is not limited to any single text ... the source of some basic cross-cultural meanings' (ibid. 91). Micromyths are combined to form the 'macromyth', a 'multinational multimyth' somewhat analogous to Lévi-Strauss' structures. The macromyth is essentially a construct brought about through the act of comparative observation (ibid. 93); that is, a generalizing way of classifying types of narrative such as 'afterlife myth' or 'creation myth'.

While such categories are useful, a third category is required in order to approach a comprehensive organization of the elements of myths: that of culture-specific details, which we may refer to simply as 'symbols' (following Bynum). This is in preference to Doniger's (ibid. 90–1) oversimplifying 'nouns'. Though 'noun' is perhaps more neutral in that it does not assume an embodiment of 'symbolism', it is also incomplete – 'adjective' and 'verb' are also relevant.¹⁰ While Lévi-Strauss (1963: 210) borrowed linguistic terminology to make the analogy of *langue* (structure/myth) and *parole* (mytheme), it may be useful here to reconfigure the analogy as *langue* (structure/myth), *grammaire* (mytheme), and *parole* (symbol). Word forms meaning through the use of

grammar in such combinations as to constitute language; just as culture-specific details/symbols are expressed in mythemes which constitute the overall myth/structure. In any case, it is clear that a tripartite organizational system of categories is required in order to accommodate all levels of similarities and dissimilarities found in the present comparison.

The acceptance of a definition of ‘symbols’ as ‘culture-specific details’ implies that the other categories of ‘mythemes’ and ‘structures’ are *not* wholly culture-specific, which implies some type of universal mechanism other than ‘culture’ to account for cross-cultural similarities. In light of the findings of our comparison, the implication is not unreasonable. As Doniger (1998: 143) wrote, ‘If we suspect that certain things are culturally constructed but several different cultures construct them in the same way, that sameness strikes a blow on the side of nature,’ that is, as opposed to ‘nurture’. In other words, the ‘suspected’ cultural construct is thus not culture-specific at all.

Obviously, the structure ‘afterlife conception’ is consistent cross-culturally, or there could be no present book. We have also seen that the mythemes are consistent cross-culturally, while the symbols utilized in the expression of the mythemes are largely culture-specific. It is not surprising that these details/symbols would be culture-specific, as they are plainly influenced by environment, history, social organization, and so on. Conceptions of afterlife hierarchies, for example, reflect earthly social hierarchies; and earthly societies are not identical to each other. Animals in the texts obviously reflect those found in local environments: crocodiles in Egypt, lions in Mesopotamia, horses in India, tigers in China, coatis in Mesoamerica. We unsurprisingly do not find specifically ancient Egyptian elements in a nineteenth-century Hawaiian NDE, or in the texts of civilizations other than Egypt. As stated in the Introduction, Osiris does not judge the Vedic dead, and Inana does not descend to the Yellow Springs to play football with the Lords of Xibalba. These are culture-specific symbols within universal mythemes within universal structures. Thus, while there are diverse methods of ascent (on cremation smoke, ladders, dragons, chariots, celestial bodies, spiritual bodies, etc.); and various modes of evaluation of one’s earthly conduct, all the traditions and the NDE contain the *concepts* or themes these *symbols* express: ascent/OBE and judgement. Other symbols include *particular methods* of

reward and punishment (e.g. dwelling in an Aztec realm of music and flowers, or eating hair in the Vedic river of blood), numerous specific demons, perils, gates, ferrymen, and paths; while other *mythemes* include divinization, travel between and within realms, borders or limits, and so on.

It must be acknowledged that there are no strictly objective criteria for distinguishing between the categories which are, in fact, somewhat fluid. For example, a case could be made for such broad structural concepts as ‘time’, ‘divine’, and ‘afterlife’ – or indeed for symbols such as ferrymen and canine guides/guard – to be considered *mythemes* (ibid. 151). As discussed earlier, comparison is largely a matter of ‘selectiveness’, and particular categorizations are determined by how wide or narrow the focus is, and by the particular research question. For example, in a wide-angle focus on the mythemic level, Vladimir Propp (1927: 92) distilled the folktale down to the recurrence of five elements (mirrored, incidentally, in the afterlife texts): the protagonist experiences a ‘lack’, goes on a quest to overcome it, encounters helpers and/or opponents, undergoes tests/trials, and is rewarded or confronted with another ‘lack’. When Eliade (1976: 19) contended that in afterlife conceptions cross-culturally, one ‘may be certain that there will be a river and a bridge, a sea and a boat; a tree, and cove, or a precipice; a dog, [and] a demonic or angelic psychopomp or doorkeeper’, he surely overgeneralized the symbolic level. However, if we expand their symbolism to the mythemic level we find that they correspond to the familiar elements of barrier or limit, locomotion and intermediate states, perils, and supernatural beings. While this is consistent with Lincoln’s (1991: 14) approach to some degree, his interpretations are not borne out here; for example, that rivers in afterlife mythology represent oblivion, and that ferrymen represent old age. Instead, depending on their function in a given text, rivers can be interpreted thematically as either barriers/limits (symbolized in other texts by gates, doors, or walls); or, along with ferrymen, as symbolic of the afterlife journey and the means of embarking on that journey (symbolized in other texts by paths, ladders, chariots, boats, ropes, etc.).

Thus, the methodology developed for the present comparison, as well as the comparison itself, actually provide a way of negotiating these categories. In other words, the data support the theory while the theory supports the data. As has been stated, the comparison demonstrates that

the differences are generally highly specific and detailed, while the similarities are more thematic. It is also clear that the finer our focus, the less comprehensible we find a text. While the structural level is clear, the mythemic level can be less so, and the symbolic level most prone to obscurity. Symbols – or at least their meanings – do not recur as often cross-culturally as Jung may have had it, though structures and mythemes do.

To reiterate, symbols express mythemes, and mythemes are combined to form the overall narrative structure (myth or NDE report), like a collection of metaphors organized to form an allegory. The differences between the conceptions of afterlife experiences in the ancient texts cross-culturally, and in the NDE reports, are predominately on the symbolic, culture-specific level. The similarities are largely on the mythemic, (quasi-)universal level. If we do not take all the descriptions in the texts literally, but see them rather as culture-specific symbols which express particular elements of (quasi-)universal human concepts/experiences, it is clear that the differences do not negate the significance of the consistent similarities. This model is supported by the fact that the NDE itself appears to be a collection of subjectively experienced universal phenomena, interpreted in culture/individual-specific ways (cf. Belanti et al. 2008).

It is perhaps needless to say that a thorough understanding of the extent of the use of symbolism and metaphor in the afterlife texts of any of our civilizations has not been achieved by current scholarship (let alone a comprehensive understanding of their meanings). A self-awareness of the use of symbols to express more fundamental ‘truths’ is evident in the modern Lacandon Maya belief (though not clearly attested in ancient Maya sources) that afterlife obstacles are illusions intended to test the readiness of the deceased to proceed to higher realms. The river, for instance, is symbolic of the tears of grieving friends and relatives, but to the deceased it is experienced as a barrier (Bierhorst 2002: 155). A similar usage may be applicable to the herb from the Illusion Tree which makes one divine in the Chinese ‘Ballad of Tung Flees’; that is, the herb allows one to transcend the illusory aspects of the spiritual realm through divinization. The use of the prison/underworld metaphor in the ‘Hymn to Nungal’ also suggests that descriptions of one and/or the other are not to be taken literally.

In summary, the most significant thing about NDE phenomena as comparative data is that they are composed of a more or less *fixed set* of nine elements – a limited repertoire of consistently recurring features. This set corresponds to *the nine most frequently recurring similarities which are consistently found in a similarly fixed set of cross-cultural, cross-temporal, cross-contextual themes and concepts*. It is as if these nine key elements of the NDE were imported whole as a set into the afterlife conceptions of each of the civilizations. The corresponding culture-specific model of each element can be summarized as follows:^{[11](#)}

1. OBE/Ascent

- (a) Egypt: ascent on a stairway (CT 1130), smoke, ladder, Nightboat (Pyr. W178, W174, W149).
- (b) Mesopotamia: Damu in spiritual form, and the spirits he meets (Des. 51ff.); ascent of Etana, of Mami in *Atrahasis*, references in various hymns.
- (c) India: spirit ‘shaken off’ (JB_B I, 46) or ‘rises up from’ the body (CU VIII.12.1–2); ascent on cremation smoke (RV_A X.16.2–5, 9) and on rays of light (SB X.5.2.3; CU III.13.6).
- (d) China: OBE recurrent in *Zh.* and *Cci*; ‘when I no longer have a body’ (Wen zu); unspecified means of ascent (oracle bones; *Shi* 242; *Zh. passim* etc.); and ascent via dragons, chariot, clouds etc. (*Cci*).
- (e) Mesoamerica: ascent of Twins (PV 141–2); Quetzalcoatl’s ashes and heart ascend as birds (AC 7:37).

The theme is also implicit in all traditions by the very concepts of souls/soul components undergoing experiences after physical death; and by associations with the rising sun/Venus.

2. Corpse Encounter

- (a) Egypt: the ‘efflux’ or corpse of Osiris in the underworld, identified with the deceased (CT VII.283, 1082).
- (b) Mesopotamia: the corpse of Inana in the underworld, which is resurrected (*In*); Damu’s rebirth through his own congealed

blood (*Des.*).

- (c) India: the ‘Decay’ in the ‘house infernal’ (*AV_A* II.14.3).
- (d) China: the corpses of divinized humans at Mt. Kunlun; corpse of god Notch Flaw (*Shj* 184, 209).
- (e) Mesoamerica: Numerous destructions/rebirths of twins (*PV*); Quetzalcoatl reflected in mirror as corpse (*LS* 5:45–6).

3. *Darkness/Tunnel*

- (a) Egypt: underworld paths of Rosetau (*CT* 1034), the solar boat (*passim*), Two Ways (*CT* Book of Two Ways), ‘traveling in darkness’ (*Pyr.* W170).
- (b) Mesopotamia: ‘place of darkness’ (*DB*); the netherworld when the sun is in the celestial realm (*passim*) etc.
- (c) India: Paths of Gods and Fathers (*RV_A* X.14.9–10), ‘bottomless darkness’ (*RV_A* VII.104); ‘lowest darkness’ (*AV_A* VIII.1.10–11).
- (d) China: ‘dark region’ (*Li ji*), Dark Palace (*Zh.*) etc.; unspecified means descent (oracle bones; *Shi* 214; *Zh. passim* etc.).
- (e) Mesoamerica: path of descent, darkness in Xibalba (*PV* 96); cavern (*CM* LXXXVIc: 40; IX:11).

References to descent reflect travelling through darkness, and both ascent and descent parallel movement through a ‘tunnel’.

4. *Deceased Relatives/Ancestors*

- (a) Egypt: various relatives (*CT* V.335).
- (b) Mesopotamia: parents for those who die in battle (*BEU*). Amashilama joining Damu in the netherworld (*Des.*); Ur-Namma joining his brother Gilgamesh as underworld judge.
- (c) India: fathers (i.e. ancestors; *RV_A* X.14.3); relatives (*CU* VIII.12.1–2).
- (d) China: ancestors (oracle bones; *Shi* 199; *Zh.* 191); relatives (*Zuo Zhuan* I.1; funerary documents).
- (e) Mesoamerica: Twins’ father (*PV* 140–1); relatives (*HNS* VI:27; *HINS*); parents (*CM* XVIII:30).

5. Presence or Being of Light

- (a) Egypt: Re, the sun-god (*passim*).
- (b) Mesopotamia: Utu, the sun-god (*passim*); Nergal (t.2.4.2.21); Enki ('Prayer-letter to Enki'); Lugalera (t.2.4.5.2); Ishtaran (*Des.*).
- (c) India: Vivasvat, the sun-god (*RV_A* VII.88); rays of light at ascent (*SB* X.5.2.3; *CU* III.13.6); 'inextinguishable light' (*RV_A* IX.113.7–11), 'we have gone to the light' (*RV_A* 8.48.3); cf. *KYV* (II.6.2).
- (d) China: the sun (*Cci* 339; 198; *passim*); 'glittering light' (*Shi* 242); radiant divinized ancestors (*Li* II.II.1.22).
- (e) Mesoamerica: the sun, Venus (*passim*); light (*PV* 102, 141–2; Durán).

In addition to beings of light, all traditions feature realms characterized by bright light, and (with the possible exception of Mesopotamia) the deceased becoming stars.

6. Conduct Evaluation/Life Review

- (a) Egypt: Herd of Justification (*Pyr.* P510); deceased's 'annals' (P450); life review of *Merikare*; judgement by Osiris/self (*CT* VI.452).
- (b) Mesopotamia: life review and judgement in *DB*; *ETCSL* t.5.2.4; numerous underworld judges (*passim*); judgement of Inana etc.
- (c) India: judgement via weighing of the soul (*RV* XI.2.7; XII.9.1); Faith, Nonfaith and Yama (*SB* 12–13).
- (d) China: 'slanderers' sent to Shang Di or Yo Pei (*Shi* 279); Shang Di 'pacifies' or 'suppresses' (*Chunqiu* 1, 18a); judgement by Shao si Ming (*Cci*), heavenly palaces for 'recompenses and punishments' (*HNZ* 108).
- (e) Mesoamerica: Lords and Council of Xibalba (*PV* 94–5); afterlife fates determined by conduct (Sahagun *HNS*: VI:163; de Landa 131–2).

7. Barriers/Obstacles

- (a) Egypt: rivers/bodies of water, various perils, trials, and demonic beings (all *passim*); interrogation (*Pyr.* P476; *CT* 398).
- (b) Mesopotamia: as above; interrogation of Inana and Gilgamesh.
- (c) India: as above; interrogation (*JB* I.18).
- (d) China: as above; interrogation ('Ballad of Tung Flees').
- (e) Mesoamerica: as above; interrogation (*PV* 133; *HNS* III: 2–6).

8. *Divinization/Oneness/Enlightenment*

- (a) Egypt: the deceased becomes Osiris and Re (*passim*, e.g. *CT* 56, 268–78); various others gods (*passim*) including a composite deity (*W472*); member apotheosis (*Pyr.* *W146*, 148).
- (b) Mesopotamia: Bilgames, Ur-Namma, Damu, Ningishzida, etc. all undergo divine transformation.
- (c) India: ancestors are gods (*RV* X.15.8–11, 68.11); the deceased becomes a golden god who becomes Agni (*X.1.4.12*; *VIII.6.1.21*); concept of *brahman* (*Kau* IV.15).
- (d) China: ancestors in realm of gods (oracle bones); divine transcendence (*Li* XXVIII.1.44); 'godlike' (*Zh.* 48).
- (e) Mesoamerica: Twins' multiple transformations and divinizations (*PV* 131–2; 141–2); royalty becomes divine; (*HNS* III: 201–10); all who die become gods ('Song of Tlaloc' 6).

9. *Other Realm/Origin Point*

All feature various celestial worlds and underworlds.

- (a) Egypt: afterlife as origin point (*Pyr.*); as 'home' *The Man Who Was Weary of Life*; 'the place which you know' (*CT* IV.296).
- (b) Mesopotamia: return to origin point theme not explicit, though perhaps hinted at in *Atrahasis*.
- (c) India: afterlife as 'home' (*RV_B* X.17.3).
- (d) China: 'home' (*Shi* 242; *Went Tzu* 172; *HNZ* 69).
- (e) Mesoamerica: 'home' (*HNS* 6:20; *CM* III: 5).

It is important to note here again that the main consistencies lie in descriptions of the afterlife *journey* (as opposed to destination), which is consistent with the NDE. Indeed, this focus reflects the main function of the texts: to instruct and assist the deceased on the afterlife journey. The

ultimate state is sometimes not explicit, often complex, and characterized by multiple/simultaneous experiences, though in all cases it involves becoming divine or divine-like. This is contrary to Bowker's (1991: 29–30) statement that the 'earliest speculations about death did *not* produce a belief that there is a desirable life with God beyond this life, after death'. That conclusion, however, is not actually based on a comprehensive consideration of the 'earliest speculations', which as the present study has demonstrated do in fact reveal such beliefs. While Bowker acknowledges that 'occasionally some heroic individuals' would achieve a more positive state, it is also likely that descriptions of such states served as ideals for which one might strive through moral, 'heroic', or socially correct behaviour (e.g. status emulation). While there certainly were negative conceptions, there were always other alternatives. There is also a stress on *continual* journeying: 'wandering' in the Taoist and Vedic material, the deceased joining the sun and/or Venus on its never-ending circuit, and divine omnipresence. NDE reports of ascent, darkness, emerging into light, and a being of light (as well as the associated concepts of spiritual rebirth, feelings of oneness, transcendence, etc.) are paralleled in the texts by the recurrent equation of solar/celestial cycles with death and rebirth, and indeed by the journey itself.

Chapter 10

The Interface of Conception and Experience

It has often been recognized that myth and belief have origins in experience. Frankfort et al. (1946: 11), for example, wrote that 'Speculative thought transcends experience, but only because it attempts to explain, to unify, to order experience.... Speculative thought is therefore distinct from idle speculation in that it never breaks away from experience.' This is consistent with Eliade (1959: 102) who wrote that a religious 'symbol always aims at a *reality or a situation in which human existence is engaged*'. Similarly, Hunt (1977: 251) defined myth and symbol as 'elements of man's varied experience, both natural and cultural, conscious and unconscious, manifest or repressed', which are 'filtered through the organism', and thus the 'organism's' culture. Among those who have argued in general for 'mystical experiences as a primary determinant in the development of religions' (D'Aquili and Newberg 1999: 14) are James (1902), Otto (1923), Wach (1951), Almond (1982), Davis (1989), Hick (1989) Yandell (1993), and Smart (1996).

Doniger (1996: 113) argues that one can account 'for mythological themes that appear in different cultures by assuming that they derive from certain shared human experiences....' Elsewhere she writes:

... there must be an experience for all the retellings to refract it as they do, but all we have are the refractions (some closer to the experience, some farther), the tellings, which are culturally specific, indeed, specific enough to each individual within the culture. And we can get close ... to this ideal raw experience by extrapolating from what all the myths have in common, modified in the light of what we can simply observe about the human situation in different cultures. (Doniger 1998: 56)

While Doniger perhaps did not have the NDE in mind (as opposed to the Lévi-Straussian idea that general human experiences give rise to existential questions), the argument is relevant here. However, she also writes that a theory based on common experience ‘frees us from an obligation of specifying a mechanism (such as Jung’s collective unconscious, or, more respectably [*sic*] but no more convincingly, historical diffusion) by which a universal theme might be perpetrated’¹ (ibid. 54). It is clearly important in the present study, at least, to attempt to *identify* the universal experience which gave rise to the universal beliefs. ‘Specifying the mechanism’ – the type of experience – more satisfactorily frees us from the apparent diffusionist/Jungian paradigm-trap.

According to Jungian theory, similarities between afterlife conceptions and experiences would be due to universal archetypal symbolism emanating from the collective unconscious. This is how Jung (1999: 29, 35) explained similarities between western spiritualist descriptions of the afterlife and the intermediate states (*bardos*) in the *Bardo Thödol*. The first main difficulty with such a theory is that, as Brian Morris (1987: 17) put it, ‘it simply describes the partly known in terms of the totally unknown’. It is more descriptive and organizational than genuinely explanatory – classifying and naming (‘archetype’, ‘symbol’) without explaining the collective unconscious itself, much less its mechanism(s) (cf. Grof and Halifax 1977: 177). This leads to the second objection: the theory does not explain on what basis and with what sort of process the collective unconscious constructs symbols and archetypes. For example, why would encountering barriers be virtually universal, but not a ferryman? And why would ferrymen be so widely recurrent, but the underworld ballgame restricted to two wholly separate civilizations? Finally, the notion implies that archetypes can somehow pre-exist the people who express them.

The Jungian orientation has been supported by Grof and Grof (1980: 13–14, 20ff.; cf. Grof and Halifax 1977: [chapter 8](#)) in explaining similarities in afterlife conceptions between cultures (including ‘those which had no demonstrable contact before the formation of their eschatological beliefs’), and with near-death, shamanistic, schizophrenic, and psychedelic experiences (cf. Huxley 1959). They claim that the imagery experienced in such states sometimes ‘appears to be from a cultural framework entirely unknown to the subject, or totally alien to his background’ (Grof and Grof 1980: 14). The states themselves they

characterize as ‘psychic realities’ (ibid. 31; cf. Grof 1994: 6–7). In addition to the limitations of Jungian theory outlined above, Grof and Grof neglect the differences and over-generalize the similarities across a vast range of experience-types, while downplaying culture/individual-specific elements. The term ‘psychic realities’ is also vague: are they real only to the psyche, and therefore subjective, that is, imaginary?

Nevertheless, in the present case, diffusion is no more ‘respectable’ than Jungian theory, for the chain of historical processes and events required for a diffusionist explanation is equally speculative, and actually more demonstrably unlikely (as seen in [Chapter 2](#)). The two theories share the major difficulties of being unable to explain why certain motifs and themes are (quasi-)universal, why some are cross-cultural but not universal, and why some are culture specific; that is, why some are ‘selected’ by some cultures while others are not. Neither theory explains why only concepts and symbols occur cross-culturally but not proper nouns; nor why other mythological structures (e.g. creation) do not share the same consistent mythemes as do afterlife conceptions.

In Jungian terms, afterlife experiences of all our traditions can certainly be seen as exemplifying the mythologized process of individuation (i.e. to become the ‘whole’, true self), replete with the archetypal themes of psychopomp/shaman, a regenerating ‘descent’ into hidden realms of the unconscious (e.g. in dreams; Hornung 1992: 95), netherworld gates symbolizing the point of transformation (DuQuesne 1991: 12), and divinization/rebirth/enlightenment through the attainment of self-knowledge. Eliade (1957: 98) similarly viewed hell as a return to the origin-point; heaven as the transcendence of the physical state and a merging with the sacred and infinite; and death itself as wisdom and enlightenment. With the exception of the origin-point being specifically associated with hells, these themes *are* associated with these symbolic meanings in the texts reviewed above. This observation does not, however, demonstrate that afterlife beliefs are symbolic of the process of individuation; and indeed the point of making the observation is ultimately obscure and non-explanatory. The theory is thus not necessarily *wrong*, though again, *identification* brings us no nearer to any real understanding of the recurrence of concepts as outlined in [Chapter 9](#).

Unless we allow for the possibility that the symbolism refers to relevant experience (e.g. NDE as opposed to psychological processes and

development), to suggest that afterlife beliefs are ‘symbolic’ ultimately decontextualizes them by assuming that the texts refer to a different type of phenomenon than they actually describe. Furthermore, such a theory cannot accommodate the NDE, for as an unsought, spontaneous experience it does not belong to the same category as the *creation* of a text or image, or the *expression* of a concept. Finally, it is also reductionist (ironic for a theory which demands a leap of faith to accept its basic premise of a collective unconscious), for it does not allow for the possibility of the NDE being an objectively transcendental event, that is, one that is not simply a dying brain drawing universal symbols from a hypothetical collective unconscious through some unknown process and for obscure reasons.

These issues can be resolved if we accept the suggestion implicit in the comparison in [Chapter 9](#): that the NDE influenced conceptions of afterlife experience in ancient civilizations. The experience is specified, widely attested, and contextually consistent with the content of the texts. To argue conversely, that the experience is dependent upon belief, would not address the cross-cultural, cross-temporal, and cross-contextual similarities outlined above.

Andrew Lang (1898: 322ff.) reached similar conclusions concerning the origins of religious belief and the evidence from psychical research in general. The ancient texts and the NDE all share William James’ (1902: 507–10) defining aspects of religious experience: ‘the divided self and the struggle’, ‘the change of personal centre and the surrender of the lower self’, ‘the appearance of exteriority of the helping power ... and yet a sense of union with it’, and ‘feelings of security and joy’. Specific personal and cultural details, James argued, ‘reconstruct’ the experiences ‘in their individual forms’, though a common core might be ‘sifted’ out from the discrepancies, and it is this core which might be scientific fact. Regardless of its veridicality or otherwise, the NDE is indeed ‘scientific fact’. McClenon’s (1994: 151) conclusions regarding cross-cultural similarities in cases of anomalous experiential phenomena, or ‘wondrous events’² are consistent with James. He argued that universal ‘primary experiences’ are expressed in culture-specific ways, and contribute to the formation of religious beliefs, thus accounting for the cross-cultural similarities of such beliefs:

Although wondrous events are part of a symbiotic process in which culture shapes narrative accounts and the accounts, in turn, affect experiential reports, the thematic elements in common within wondrous accounts have had an impact on religious ideologies, contributing to cross-cultural convergences.... These common features include the belief in spirits, souls, heavens, hells.... (ibid. 151)

More directly relevant to the present study, McClenon (ibid. 168) compared modern NDE reports with return-from-death narratives from medieval China, Japan, and Europe, and concluded that

... *universal* features among accounts from different cultures and eras supports the experiential source theory.... Some Medieval Chinese and Japanese folklore reports are derived from *universal* features that are intrinsic to NDEs. Similarities between modern Western and Medieval Asian conceptions of heaven and hell can be explained, in part, as a result of these common elements.

He stated further that ‘Because various features appear cross-culturally and are temporally consistent, it is logical to assume that wondrous events also affected early human societies’ (ibid. 239).

The NDE source theory has had further support from various quarters. Becker (1981: 159) suggested that Chinese Pure Land afterlife conceptions are based on religious and/or near-death experiences. He explains the similarities between the early Japanese and Chinese NDEs and those of the modern West in terms of similarity of experience (Becker 1984: 64). Badham has argued likewise on the relationship between NDE and afterlife beliefs generally (cf. MacGregor 1992: 193; Ma’súmián 1995: [chapter 10](#)), with particular focus on Japanese Pure Land Buddhism (1990), and texts such as the *Bardo Thödol*, and the late thirteenth-century Jewish mystical text, the *Zohar* (1997: 134). Platthy (1992: 60ff., 105) noted similarities between the NDE and afterlife conceptions found in the *Upanishads*, Buddhist sutras, Zoroastrian beliefs, and mythical and historical accounts from Classical antiquity. Schumann-Antelme and Rossini (1998: 110) identified some common elements between NDEs and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.³ Hermann (1990: 181) noted some compelling similarities

between the NDE and *Zhuangzhi*, including a common spiritual orientation of feelings of oneness with the universe, love, joy and peace, ineffability, and so on (ibid. 176–7). Correspondences between the *Up.* and the NDE have also been noted by Borman (1989: 97ff.), who also suggested that the NDE might be useful as an interpretative tool for understanding other ancient texts relating to the afterlife. Collins and Fishbane (1995: ix–x) stated that experiences such as dreams, shamanic visions, and NDE ‘suggest that religious beliefs about the flight of the soul have some foothold in human experience, however enigmatic that experience may be’; while also acknowledging that such experiences are informed and interpreted in culture-specific ways. Long before the NDE had been identified as a discrete phenomenon, Elbé (1906: 4) argued that a common belief can be ‘disentangled’ from early afterlife conceptions cross-culturally, and that this indicates ‘an original revelation, as if primeval man had been favoured with an insight into the problem of the invisible world’.

Anthropological data on the origins of afterlife conceptions add further support to the theory. In 1940, Hallowell found that the Winnipeg Salteaux Native Americans based their afterlife beliefs on dreams, mediumistic communications, and NDEs, with the latter holding the greatest importance and authority (Audette 1982: 35). The same has been found for other small-scale societies: when ‘asked about the origins of their knowledge of the Beyond, the members of the various cultures say they gained this knowledge from the experiences of those who have returned [i.e. NDErs] and from shamans’ (Kalweit 1984: 70). In a survey of sixty-seven small-scale societies worldwide it was found that 95 per cent believe in OBEs. Noting that they are described in remarkably similar ways across these societies, Shiels (1978: 607) suggested that the belief is based on experience, concluding: ‘When different cultures at different times and in different places arrive at the same or a very similar out-of-the-body belief we begin to wonder if this results from a common experience of this happening’ (ibid. 699; cf. McIntosh 1980).

In addition to the apparent examples embedded in the more overtly theological, philosophical, and metaphorical texts (e.g. *Pyr.*, *RV*), with the exception of Egypt, explicit references to an individual dying, returning to life, and undergoing experiences highly reminiscent of NDEs occur in each civilization. That the concept was known in Mesopotamia is suggested by

the Akkadian term *muballit miti*, ‘the one who makes the dead to live’, that is, bringing back one who is on the brink of death (Heidel 1949: 208). Nergal was said to have the power ‘to carry off and to bring back’ (*LAS* 159–61; 2.5.2.1). Etana’s fall from heaven might also suggest the NDE return, particularly as it was in the context of a visionary dream. Indeed, the *Death of Bilgames* may be the world’s first documented NDE. As summarized earlier, lying on his deathbed, Bilgames travels to the netherworld, and undergoes a life review assisted by beings of light (deities in Mesopotamian thought were generally believed to be ‘surrounded by a blinding, awe-inspiring radiance’ [Foster 2001: 19, n.3]). He has a transformative experience in which his heart is ‘undone’ by a being of light (Utu), becomes god-like, is reunited with deceased relatives, then returns to his body and awakens. The stress on Bilgames’s case as being exceptional may reflect the exceptionality of the occurrence of NDE phenomena. Badham (2003: 10) made the relevant point that modern medical technology has ‘democratized’ the NDE, explaining why its occurrence was rare in earlier times; as well as why those who had NDEs would have been considered exceptional individuals endowed with religious authority. While it is impossible to determine if figures such as Bilgames and Quetzalcoatl (*LS*) were historical individuals as the texts claim (or even loosely based on historical individuals), the common idea of *becoming* divine in the afterlife suggests that they were perceived as having human origins.

The *AV* (VIII.1–2) ‘charms to recover a dying man’ demonstrate knowledge of NDEs in Vedic India, and describe the soul as ascending from the underworld and returning to the body in terms similar to those used to describe heavenly ascent (cf. Bodewitz 2002). A magical text is intended to retrieve the breath and life from the underworld and restore them to the body (*AV* VII.53.3). According to Bodewitz (1991: 40), the departure from the body during shamanic journeys of the *asu* soul – a ‘free-soul’ which enables consciousness – would cause a state of apparent death. The *JB* (I.167) contains a reference to individuals who visited Yamaloka and returned from death; and the otherworld experiences of Bhrgu (*JB*) and Naciketas (*KaU*) were brought about by their fathers murdering them.

In the Chinese poem ‘*Ai shi ming*’ the spirit reluctantly returns to the body when his path is blocked by a river (cf. ‘*Yuan You*’). ‘*Zhao hun*’ is

intended to call the soul back to the body from dangerous afterlife realms. In what may be the world's first contextually factual NDE narrative, a seventh century BCE Chinese provincial ruler recovered from an illness and reported an enjoyable journey to the home of the Emperor of Heaven, who gave him precognitive information which was later verified. A similar case dates from 498 BCE (de Groot 1892: IV, 113–14), and numerous further Chinese return-from-death accounts are known from the third century BCE onwards (cf. Harper 1994: 14; Campany 1990: 91–2). Around the turn of the millennium, a document relates how a woman was revived from death after six days and reported having seen her deceased father-in-law who told her that it was not yet her time to die (Arbuckle 1997: 109). De Groot (1892: 123) cites a single source (*Taiping Kwang chi*) which gives 127 Chinese accounts up to the tenth century CE.

In *PM* (179, n.3), Sahagun related the NDE of Quetzalpetlatl, the daughter-in-law of Moquihuix, a Mexica ruler from 1467 to 1473. Though the narrative is obviously deeply culturally-embedded (and the text incomplete), it nevertheless includes the thematic elements of out-of-body journeys to other realms, a guide, a sense of joy (singing; presents brought by the guide), other spirits and deceased relatives, idealized mirror-image of earth, encountering a divine/supernatural presence (Tlaloc), and a return characterized by a positive transformation (healing the sick on earth). The fact that the account immediately follows a description of beliefs about the underworld demonstrates a clear link between NDE and afterlife conceptions. Sahagun (*HNS* IX:3, II:498; 181, n.20) also referred to the return-from-death experiences of Aztec noblewomen in the context of prophecies they delivered upon their return, demonstrating further that the NDE was familiar in pre-conquest Mesoamerica.

A similar theory is that afterlife conceptions are based upon shamanic visionary experiences. Shamanism is typically a practice whereby a spiritual healer, or shaman, travels temporarily to another realm during an ecstatic trance in order to retrieve the soul of an individual who is in danger of death, or to gain knowledge. Eliade (1976: 17; cf. 1964: 500ff.) argued for the likelihood that 'many features of "funerary geography" as well as some themes of the mythology of death are the result of the ecstatic experiences of shamans'. He found similarities – particularly of 'epic themes' – in shamanic journey narratives of 'Siberia, Central Asia, Polynesia ..., and in some North American tribes' (ibid.). Hultkrantz

(1967: 132) similarly argued that ideas of dualism and OBE stemmed from shamanic experience; as did the conception of dual souls, for part of the 'self' must remain in the body in order to keep it alive while the 'free soul' roams in the other realm.

The shamanic origin theory is not without problems, however. It does not explain why there would be cross-cultural similarities of shamanic visions to begin with, particularly when *different* shamanic techniques (e.g. drumming, dancing, chanting, and/or varying types of hallucinogens) are used in different societies. There is also a danger of over-generalizing their diversity, and oversimplifying their consistencies with the NDE (Fox 2003: 328). Shamanic journeys do not always involve realms of the dead, for example. They are not spontaneous, and are therefore more apt to be influenced by expectation, as Rock et al. (2005, 2006) have demonstrated. In fact, there has been little in-depth cross-cultural comparison of the content of shamanic journey experiences, and there is conflicting evidence as to whether it is indeed cross-culturally regular. The cross-cultural existence of shamanic *practices* has certainly been demonstrated, though a recurring phenomenology of shamanic 'soul-journeys' has not.

Winkelman (2004: 196) has claimed universality for shamanic 'death-and-rebirth experience; soul journey, flight to lower, middle, and upper worlds; and transformation into animals'. The last two are not necessarily sub-experiences of the first, and the latter particularly can be seen as a separate category of experience. While 'other realms' and 'transformation' are key elements in our comparison, explicitly 'lower, middle, and upper worlds' and specifically 'transformation into animals' are not. They are more specific than the mythemic (quasi-)universal similarities found in the texts and in the NDE, and are thus apparently particular to shamanic experience. Similarly, the allegedly universal death-and-rebirth sub-experience of dismemberment followed by reconstruction (ibid. 205) is unknown for the NDE, and occurs only in apparently non-shamanic Egypt. Rock et al. (2005, 2006) attempted to identify universal shamanic images by inducing visions in naïve participants (US undergraduates) using shamanic drumming practices. In addition to the 'three worlds', they found a common recurrence of 'typical' shamanic cosmography, including rocky ravines, bridges, predatory creatures, and rivers. Again, these similarities are on the symbolic rather than the mythemic level, and are thus less consistent

cross-culturally and in the ancient texts. Although OBE and other NDE elements were not factors accounted for in the experiment's methodology, it is significant that their spontaneous occurrence was not reported.

Green (1998: 209) not only states that shamanism is remarkably consistent across cultures, but also suggests that it is an attempt to replicate the state achieved spontaneously during phenomena such as NDE, OBE, and lucid dreaming. However, the examples of shamanic journeys given (ibid. 212–15) are in fact very little like NDEs.⁴ Shamanic journeys appear to have more individualistic elements, fewer internal consistencies, and features which are not typical of the NDE, such as travelling through time and to earthly places (as opposed to mythologized quasi-earthly locales) (Wasson 1972a: 197–8); and evidently hallucinatory experiences such as encountering a man with hair in the shape of a bishop's hat and his heart beating on the outside of his chest, a woman in the moon with a bayonet in her heart, and so on (Fernandez 1972: 252). It is worth noting, too, that the Salteaux Indians not only distinguish between NDEs and shamanic journeys, but class the latter as dreams and the former as real (Wade 2003: 97).⁵

Nevertheless, many *specific* examples of shamanic journeys could be given which are consistent with the NDE and the ancient texts (e.g. in Eliade 1964), and which are clearly influenced by culture-specific, familiar, earthly elements and symbols. These include OBE, travelling to a spirit realm, light, joy, ineffability, deceased relatives, barrier, and return (often after being instructed to do so by a divine being or relative) (Kalweit 1984: 41), life review and judgement (Doore 1990; Pinchbeck 2003). For example, the Mesoamerican Huichol Indians, whose shamanic practices are believed to be virtually unchanged since pre-Columbian times, describe a peyoteinduced journey of travelling through the Gateway of the Clashing Clouds, and along a trail to the origin point 'where Our Mother dwells'. The inexperienced 'walk in darkness', though all become 'new' and are sensitive to the bright light emanating from the world beyond the clouds. Dangers include whirlwinds, and obstacles placed by sorcerers (Furst 1972: 162–3). The Bwiti of Gabon use the plant *T. iboga* in combination with drumming, singing, and dancing, and describe journeys to other realms via a 'long, multicolored road' or 'over many rivers' to the realm of the ancestors who take the deceased to the 'great gods'. One man described a road into a forest, then 'a barrier of black

iron' with a bright light beyond, followed by an experience of flying with his father (Fernandez 1972: 251). That much of the anthropological study of shamanism was carried out prior to widespread knowledge of the NDE is also significant here.

There is clear evidence for shamanism in ancient India, China, and Mesoamerica, generally involving associations with afterlife journeys. Sahagun described an Aztec ritual involving hallucinogenic mushrooms, in which the shamans experienced visions of their own deaths and other precognitions (*HNS* IX: 38–9). The shamanic drug peyote grew only in a region called Mictlan – the same name as the afterlife realm (XI: 129). In a mythological reference to shamanism, an old man gives Quetzalcoatl a potion, telling him, 'You will weep; you will be compassionate. You will think upon your death. And you will think upon the place where you are to go' (Léon-Portilla 1980: 154; Bierhorst 1984: 42). The *Cantares Mexicanos* may have been performed in shamanic contexts, and often include references to journeying to the otherworld to gather songs (equated with flowers) (Bierhorst 1985: 18).

In addition to the ostensibly shamanic figurines found in ancient China, the *Li ji* (I.II.1.32; cf. II.I.I.20) includes numerous references to 'calling back' the soul. According to *Zhuangzi*, hermits undertake such journeys simply for enjoyment (Hawkes 1985: 42), as opposed to soul-retrieval. *Cci* also contains strong shamanic elements, including references to the shaman eating valerian root, chrysanthemum petals, and the dew from a magnolia (ibid. 67). The 'Nine Songs' mention various hallucinogenic plants (e.g. 'spirit hemp' in Song V), and describe chanting, drumming, and the consumption of 'cassia-wine and peppered drink' (Song I; Waley 1955: 23). In the song 'Up the Mound' (52 BCE) a man 'from the river depths' descends from a burial mound and says, 'Magic fungus is my chariot, dragons are my steeds; I gaze as I wander beyond the four seas' (Birrell 1988: 66). 'A Long Song Ballad Number Two' features a shamanic initiate on hallucinogenic mushrooms being led westwards by a fairy on a white deer (ibid. 68). The Herb of Life referred to on the bronze mirrors might also have shamanic significance, as might eating the Flower of Jade in *Cci*, and the herb of the Illusion Tree in 'The Ballad of Tung Flees'. Paper (1995: 57) suggests that the similarities between the ascent descriptions in Chinese texts are due to their authors describing similar shamanic experiences.

Shamanic journeys are apparently intermixed with afterlife conceptions in the poetry, strongly suggesting that the origins of such conceptions lie in shamanic experiences; though again, NDEs are also attested in China from at least the seventh century BCE. The Chinese shamans and NDErs perhaps discovered that these were analogous experiences, and thereby extrapolated their beliefs.

An apparent reference to drug-induced afterlife journeys of the shamanic type occurs in the *RV_B* 9.94.2, wherein Soma ‘has revealed the abode of immortality. All worlds have expanded for him who found the Light’. Wasson (1972b: 202) argued that Soma was the *fly agaric* mushroom, suggesting the same for Gilgamesh’s herb (ibid. 212). Soma was associated with the moon (Panikkar 1977: 892), an Upanishadic death-realm, and the ritual of sharing it was intended, in part, to provide a foretaste of heaven (ibid. 633). It caused the individual to transcend both earth and heaven (*RV* X.119): ‘We have drunk Soma, we have become immortal. We have reached the light. We have found the gods’ (*RV* VIII.48; Bodewitz 1991: 19; cf. *RV_A* IX.113). The poets of the *RV* are referred to as ‘seers’, individuals who have supernaturally inspired perceptions. They are described as ‘furious, raging ..., vibrating, trembling, excited people’, an apparent reference to their trance state (Bodewitz 1991: 16). There is also a reference to the OBE of a *muni* – a ‘long-haired, drugged ecstatic’ – caused by drinking poison (ibid. 18; *RV* X.136). The *Jaiminya Upanishad Brahmana* refers to a ‘disembodying chant’ which enables one to leave the body (O’Flaherty 1985: 46). Bodewitz (1991: 14) has concluded that descriptions of light in India and Europe are based on actual ‘visionary experiences’ brought about by shamanic techniques, such as drugs, fasting, and meditation.

The existence of Mesopotamian shamanism is more speculative. Parpola (1993: 191–2) has characterized Gilgamesh as a ‘mystic’ who uses ‘a special technique ... for attaining dreams’ (i.e. pressing his head between his knees). This, as well as the ‘prolonged weeping and praying’ which brought about the reunion with the deceased Enkidu and the resultant attainment of occult knowledge (Tab. IX.1–14), are both known mystical practices in Kabbalistic texts⁶ (ibid. 194). Gilgamesh is described as an ascetic: wandering the desert dressed in animal skins and with unkempt, wild hair. Though we are only secondarily concerned here with the *Epic* proper, Parpola’s interpretations have implications for the

Sumerian version, particularly as he further argues that *BEU*/Tablet XII was always an integral part of the *Epic*, and is the climax of a narrative expression of the path to ‘spiritual awakening’ (cf. Evers 1995: 70–1). Gilgamesh’s plant of rejuvenation, the ‘plant of birth sought by Etana’, and Inana’s life-giving plant and waters might also have a shamanic significance, as might the *muballit miti* mentioned above. Abusch (1995: 17) considered references to underworld descent and stellar ascent in a first millennium BCE Babylonian incantation to be reflections of ‘personal experience’ of ‘transformation, ascent to heaven and mission to the netherworld’, in a shamanic/ritualistic context.

The evidence for Egyptian shamanism is weak. DuQuesne (1991: 12–13) has suggested that certain Egyptian conceptions may reveal shamanic origins: transformations into different gods and animals, and the deceased being led to the land of the dead by Anubis, whom DuQuesne considers to be a shamanic figure. While there are no clear references to shamanic practice, and equating a deity with a shaman is problematic, the plant of life in *Pyr.* may be relevant. It was also believed that the *ba* could wander in dreams to earthly and supernatural realms (Trigger 2003: 535).

In summary, the elements of the NDE are more consistent both crosstemporally and cross-culturally, and correspond more often to parallel mythemic elements in the ancient texts than is the case with shamanic ‘journeys’. However, while the NDE thus seems a more likely experiential source for afterlife conceptions, there is *some* evidence of cross-cultural regularity of shamanic imagery which corresponds well with certain elements in the texts. While influence from shamanistic experiences thus cannot be ruled out – particularly for societies known to have practiced shamanism – the relative lack of consistency makes it less satisfying than the NDE hypothesis. Ultimately, until there is more comparative and empirical research, it is premature to suggest the existence of universal shamanic imagery, much less to equate the NDE with shamanic experiences, or to suggest that the texts discussed here are more likely to have resulted from shamanic than near-death experience.

Mention should also be made of theories that afterlife beliefs originated with dreams of deceased relatives which were interpreted as ‘real’ (e.g. in the work of Tylor, Lubbock, Frazer, Freud, et al. See Kirk 1970 268–74; Bartel 1982: 36). Such theories are problematic in that most societies draw a distinction between dreams and apparently ‘dualist’ experiences (i.e.

OBE) (Shiels 1978: 732). Lord Raglan (1945: 11) pointed out that ‘any sane person, however savage’ can distinguish between dreams and waking consciousness. He criticized such theories for seeking ‘to explain the precise and particular by the vague and the general’: one cannot extrapolate complex afterlife mythologies and related experiences from the notion of dreaming of ancestors. Hillman (1979: 3, 68) combined the theory with Jungian perspectives to suggest that dreams and underworld conceptions come from the same ‘archetypal “place”’, though this is no more useful to the present issue. Bowker (1991: 34) suggests that the idea of life after death arose from attempts to understand dreams, memories of the deceased, and genetic resemblance of the offspring to the deceased. This does not address cross-cultural similarities of conceptions; and the latter suggestion is illogical when we consider that offspring also resemble family members while they are still alive. Paper (2005: 60–1) has suggested that the proximity of burial sites to habitation sites in sedentary communities gave rise to dreams of the deceased, and thus to afterlife beliefs which functioned to help maintain kinship ties through remembrance of the ancestors (cf. Hertz 1907: 77). This also does not address cross-cultural similarities, particularly with non-sedentary societies. Finally, there is simply no consistent phenomenology of afterlife experience dreams, crossculturally or otherwise.

A similar problem occurs with explanations based on parallels with psychedelic drug experiences (shamanic or otherwise) (e.g. Huxley 1959; Grof and Halifax 1977; H. Smith 2000a). Despite similarities of *some* drug experiences to the NDE²/afterlife mythologies, they do not have anything like their regularity and consistency; and similarities are largely to do with highly general elements such as feeling of oneness or spirituality.

Chapter 11

Alternative and Supplementary Theories

Constructivist

Constructivist theories (including functionalism and structuralism) have long been the dominant paradigm in the study of myth. They often rely on positing a single factor or motive to explain afterlife beliefs (e.g. fear, denial, social/political control), and regard them as epiphenomenal to their role(s) or function(s). Essentially, the social and/or psychological context of the beliefs is seen to explain the beliefs themselves. Lévi-Strauss (1963: 210–12), for example, suggested that myths are consistent cross-culturally because the underlying fundamental structures of society are the same, and because myths attempt to explain ‘universal concerns’. Likewise, Brandon (1962: 384–5) asserted that afterlife beliefs arose from a refusal to accept ‘the prospect of personal annihilation’.¹ Variety of such beliefs he ascribed to ‘imaginative ingenuity’ as influenced by cultural ‘temperament, environment, and history’, and from contemplation of our place in the universe (ibid. 375). Such theories are mainly relevant to the fact of existence of general structures (e.g. afterlife myths) as opposed to specific mythemes, let alone symbols. While Brandon correctly addressed the cross-cultural differences, he did not actually address the similarities to any substantial degree. John Hick (1976: 73), who argues for a ‘global theology’ based partly upon the occurrence of cross-cultural similarities in afterlife beliefs, has also incorporated a constructivist paradigm into his argument. He asserted that belief in a positive afterlife was the result of ‘the emergence of individual self-consciousness and as a correlate of faith in a higher reality’. This assumes an evolutionary development of

‘religion’ *per se* (as opposed to ‘religions’); and that these concepts did not exist at some identifiable point in human history, which is clearly not the case as seen above.

Perhaps the most frequently repeated constructivist generalization is that the concept of afterlife judgement was invented by the elite as a tool of social control, to ensure good conduct through the promise of heaven and the threat of hell (e.g. Weber 1922: 140–1; Brandon 1967: 193). This theory is problematic in that *the earliest afterlife texts were usually written and read by the elite, but still contain references to judgement*. It is clearly the case, however, that the concept was *manipulated* by the elite. In Egypt, India, and China (at least) the increased popularity of funerary texts (CT, AV, funerary documents) is accompanied by an increase in explicit descriptions of negative experiences, a pattern which continued in direct proportion to the increase of accessibility of the texts (e.g. the Egyptian New Kingdom netherworld guidebooks, the Hindu *Epics* and *Puranas*, and the Buddhist *Sutra of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha* in China). The concept, however, pre-existed these later developments and its origins thus cannot lie in ‘elite control’. Furthermore, the Vedas saw an entirely different type of development. There is no functional need for the Upanishadic emphasis on enlightenment over moral/ritual behaviour, or on *moksha* over heavenly realms; and no apparent social or political reason for them. Such essentially philosophical/metaphysical concepts are not necessary (or even beneficial from a utilitarian standpoint) to the operation of a society. The fact that these concepts did not *replace* the possibility of heavenly fates but co-existed dismisses any suggestion that the promise of a positive afterlife was insufficient incentive for good behaviour. In addition, the Aztec afterlife as presented in the non-elite ethnographic sources demonstrates a greater concern at the *popular* level with post-mortem justice. While there would certainly be some political element in the expression of officially sanctioned ideas, the one-dimensionality of the theory is inadequate as it clearly cannot be applied cross-culturally, and indeed has not been demonstrated convincingly for even a single culture. The principle of Ockham’s razor would instead support the argument that concepts of afterlife judgement originated in human experiences in which it is known to occur (e.g. NDE), and was manifested in culture-specific ways (including being subject to elite manipulations/elaborations). This argument is also compelling when inverted: if afterlife judgement is a tool

of elite control, why would one have analogous experiences during a spontaneous, unsought NDE? Shields (1978: 732) similarly pointed out that there is little social function to OBEs.

As with Jungian theory, constructivisms do not adequately explain why only particular elements would occur cross-culturally, while others would not. Hunt (1977: 251) addressed this issue in an unusually comprehensive structuralist argument. She wrote: 'The reasons that a particular society selects some symbols as dominant rather than others are partly accidental, partly a matter of social projection, partly tied in with the self-generating quality of social structures, and partly linguistically-induced.' The function of the myth or theme is also a factor, and one which is culture-specific. Addressing Hunt's assertions will go some way towards demonstrating the limitations of constructivist orientations in general when applied to the present comparison. First, it is inconceivable that an identical combination of myth/symbol-selecting processes of the kind Hunt described would repeat across cultures causing five separate, largely culturally-independent civilizations to 'select' the same set of mythemic elements for the same type of belief, which just happen to correspond to the NDE. It is equally implausible that a *different* combination in each society would yield this consistent set of mythemes. Hunt further argued that myths 'reflect the contemporary state of the society', though this does not explain similar myths in societies with different social structure and/or economic status. To address this issue, Hunt argued that agrarian states (i.e. post-Neolithic, pre-industrial) have similar 'religious symbolism' which derives from social factors such as hierarchy, control of crops and animals, and reliance on the annual cycles of the seasons. Such states did produce 'esoteric knowledge which has no direct social relevance for the masses or for the management of the social system' other than conferring elite status on the 'parasitic intellectuals' who possessed it. She continued:

It is obvious that much of the complexity of the religious symbols systems of agrarian states stemmed from the intellectuals' proclivity for making up ideas for their own pleasure. But an ideological paradigm could be a powerful social tool.... Eventually the unconscious emotion that attached itself to an accepted symbolic paradigm would become part of its function, and promote its endurance over time among the members of the community.

Essentially, Hunt is merely adding ‘imagination’ and ‘emotion’ to her list of factors, thereby arguing that virtually everything in a culture and in an individual contributes to the process of myth-selection – with the glaring omission of experiential phenomena. Hunt also erroneously claimed that non-agrarian and stateless societies simply do not have ‘dominant paradigms’ or archetypes analogous to those of agrarian states. This is patently not the case for either afterlife beliefs² or NDEs and shamanic journeys in small-scale societies (and apparently stateless Vedic India).

Trigger (2003: 684) concluded that the similarities between the religions across his sample group are ‘inconsistent with both the view that early civilizations were shaped wholly by idiosyncratic factors and the view that similarities resulted only from ecological constraints’. While this is in agreement with the present study, Trigger also argued that afterlife expectations in territorial states are more optimistic than those in city-states; and that the upper class expectation of an afterlife which mirrors their earthly privilege is adopted by the lower classes through ‘status emulation’ (ibid. 539). This does not, however, explain why this would allegedly not occur in city-states which are no less socially stratified. The link between types of social organization and degrees of afterlife optimism has also not been demonstrated; and indeed the idea has been largely discredited by Carr’s (1995) ethnographic comparison. The civilizations under consideration here had dissimilarly structured societies, though thematically similar afterlife conceptions. The Vedic material arose from an apparently uncentralized, stateless, village-based society; and according to Flood (1996: 50) nothing conclusive can be said regarding Vedic religious belief reflecting social structure. The Egyptian texts appeared in a unified nation-state based on divine kingship; while Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica were composed of city-states governed by rulers with extremely high images. China was characterized by fluctuating degrees of centralization and independent statehood, for example the Chou period was feudal, and the Han was a centralized bureaucracy (Bodde 1975: 35). Furthermore, the argument does not acknowledge the possibility that religious ideas could have originated in pre-state times. Nor is Trigger’s (2003: 526f.) case helped by his repetition of familiar over-generalizations about ancient afterlife conceptions. Mesopotamian

references to light, judgement, and more positive afterlife alternatives are ignored, Utnapishtim is reportedly the 'sole exception' to a gloomy fate (ibid. 526f.), and so on. The Mexican afterlife is alleged to be the most negative of all, over-generalized as a memoryless, temporary existence as a bird, butterfly, spirit, or demon. The souls of ordinary Maya are said to be 'trapped and doomed to oblivion in the underworld' (ibid. 531) – a notion not borne out by *PV* and flatly contradicted by *RCY*. Trigger's cross-cultural generalizations about a 'limited tendency' (ibid. 539) to link afterlife fates with earthly conduct are clearly insupportable; as is his assertion that in city-states the dead *all* served the gods, while in territorial states similarities with gods were stressed for the upper class. In fact, his generalizations are full of exceptions that can only disprove the rule. For example, a positive afterlife is possible for the Maya upper classes but less so for the lower, although *all* Maya saw the afterlife as 'gloomy' (ibid. 540), though nevertheless Maya conceptions were more like territorial states than other city-states (ibid. 647). It is true that Mesoamerican and Mesopotamian city-states alone share a greater focus on Venus and a connection between a ball-game and an underworld descent. However, certain elements are also shared exclusively between particular pairs of city-states, territorial states, and apparently uncentralized India (as seen in [Chapter 9](#)), and thus cannot be explained in terms of similar social structures.

It has also been argued that afterlife conceptions reflect funerary ritual; though because such rituals differ cross-culturally this cannot explain the results of our comparison. A typical theory is that the method of corpse preparation and disposal informs afterlife motifs (e.g. Butzenberger 1996: 71); for example, ascent is associated with cremation and descent with burial. However, all the civilizations considered here had both concepts, regardless of their method of corpse-disposal. The Egyptians practised mummification and burial/entombment, Mesopotamia and China used burial, while India and the Mesoamerican civilizations used both cremation and burial. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that the situation was not the reverse: that afterlife beliefs informed funerary rituals. Certainly there are links between ritual and belief; for example ascending on cremation smoke in the Vedas, and associations between burial and the underworld – indeed many of the texts considered above are *ritual* texts. It does not follow, however, that the rituals gave rise to the

beliefs. They may instead have been enacted *expressions* of the beliefs, intended to ensure the desired fate. The existence of a parallel between a funerary ritual and an afterlife conception does not demonstrate the origin of the parallel. Contrary to ‘myth and ritual’ theory, a ritual devoid of an underpinning belief is arguably meaningless, and therefore is unlikely to have preceded the belief. Moreover, funerary ritual can be entirely independent of afterlife beliefs (see Ucko 1969).

The theory that the association of light with goodness and height accounts for concepts of ascent and radiant beings (Bodewitz 1991: 1) can be similarly inverted. The theory is merely descriptive, for it does not explain the association cross-culturally in the first place. Light and height are not objectively ‘better’ than darkness and depth. While the sun is required for life and growth, it can also burn and even be deadly during times of drought. Conversely, while darkness may conceal hidden dangers, it also provides safety through concealment; and facilitates regenerative sleep. Freshwater springs come from the dark depths of the earth, which are also required for growth and life in equal measure to light. The underworld is by no means always a negative place in the texts, and Yamaloka, Duat, Kur, the Yellow Springs, Xibalba, and Mictlan are all realms of rebirth as well as death. The fact that NDErs do not usually report feeling afraid during their episode of darkness is also significant here. It may be that such experiences caused the associations between goodness, height, and light, for which ascent, celestial bodies, deities, and realms were used as symbols; and caused the associations between darkness/emerging from darkness with ideas of transformation and rebirth.

The perspective that afterlife conceptions are paralleled by observations of the cycles of nature is also more descriptive than actually explanatory; as is the theory that they reflect rites of passage, which concern an ‘initiatory ordeal’ involving ‘separation, transition, [and] incorporation’ and a ‘rebirth’ from one condition to another (Eliade 1957: 230–1). As with ritual, drawing analogies between afterlife conceptions and initiation rites, or observations of the natural world, does not explain the origins of either phenomenon, let alone the results of our comparison. To reduce the conceptions solely to their cycles-of-nature elements also ignores other significant theological dimensions which cannot be confined to such a narrow interpretation. Evers (1995: 70) concurs, adding that the fertility aspect is merely a metaphor which does not explicate the text’s deeper

meaning. Moreover, such perspectives do not account for metaphysical motifs such as OBE, supernatural beings, and transcendental/otherworldly occurrences.

Some aspects of afterlife conceptions are undoubtedly socially/historically created, and certain cross-cultural similarities may be due to coincidentally similar social/psychological processes. Thus, for civilizations near bodies of water, 'the ship as a symbol of man's last journey is instinctively right and fitting' (Davidson 1975: 73), though the details (including types of bodies of water and ships, and the need for ferrymen) are culture-specific. Nevertheless, reasons for the culture-specific use of certain symbols over others are often obscure. For example, though butterflies are found worldwide, only Mexico conceived of them as souls of the dead. A constructivist argument would be that the association is due to an analogy of the transformation of the caterpillar with afterlife rebirth, though this does not explain its non-occurrence in the remaining civilizations. Likewise, while the dual function of afterlife canines as guides and guards reflects the earthly functions of domesticated dogs, this is not applicable in the Egyptian case where the canine is an undomesticated jackal. The association instead lies with the jackal-god of mummification, Anubis (whose appearance is thought to reflect observations of jackals scavenging for bodies in cemeteries).

As with ritual, such examples can also be inverted: the motifs may be metaphors for pre-existing ideas about the afterlife. Myths are not always intended to *explain* nature, and can instead *use* nature to illustrate more abstract concepts and ideas (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 95).

These types of theories are also largely irrelevant to the NDE which is clearly not wholly socially-constructed, but unsought, spontaneous, and interpreted/experienced within the cultural context of the NDEr. These theories cannot explain why two such apparently separate categories of human phenomena – NDE and ancient afterlife beliefs – would bear such similarities. Constructivist theories become particularly unwieldy and convoluted when multiple elements of the cross-culturally recurring set of thematic afterlife conceptions are considered. While some constructivist factors are responsible for some motifs, no comprehensive theory attempting to explain each element of this set, or its recurrence *as* a set, has been put forth. As well as over-simplifying, these theories also

severely overgeneralize, characterizing a single possible explanation for a belief in a single society as universally applicable.

Ultimately, an over-reliance on constructivist theories excludes the possibility of examining the texts on their own terms, reducing philosophical and religious thought to a simple equation relying on a single prime-mover which cannot explain the complexity and sophistication of these conceptions, their cross-cultural recurrence, or the similarities with the experiential phenomena.

Conceptual Logic, Cognition, and Neurotheology

Conceptual logic is another structuralist theory which essentially suggests that afterlife conceptions are due to the 'logical' processes of the human mind, which work the same cross-culturally. The variety of possible ways of envisioning the afterlife is limited and based on common human observation. Thus, Elbé (1906: 13, 368) concluded that, despite their similarities, afterlife ideas cross-culturally and in spiritualism are products of the imagination. More recently, on similarities between Chinese and other afterlife beliefs, Poo (1998: 218) wrote that 'human religiosity prescribes elements that are fundamental to every society', while the differences are culture-specific.

The first problem here is that such perspectives once again do not adequately account for why certain elements are similar and why others differ. Why, for example, is becoming a bird and joining the sun conceptually logical cross-culturally, but not becoming a fish in an underwater afterlife realm? Why in no case does ascent involve the human spiritual form growing wings, which is no more conceptually illogical than unobservable ladders or chariots? The theory cannot explain why afterlife conceptions occur cross-culturally in thematic sets which correspond to the unsought, spontaneous NDE; nor why this correspondence is limited to particular types of belief and does not apply to, for example, creation conceptions. Finally, the theory assumes universality for a specific kind of logic, and that what is logical in one culture will be logical in another.

Zaleski's (1987: 62–3) claim that 'there is simply no other way for the imagination to dramatize the experience of death' than the OBE is highly

overstated. There is no logical reason, for example, why the human mind does not typically conceive of consciousness monistically decomposing with the body to become one with the earth; or remaining in the body in a state of suspension awaiting physical resurrection. Nor can the OBE be based on observation – *except from the point of view of an experient*. The few small-scale societies which do not have a conception of the OBE, or even of an afterlife (Shiels 1978: 732) further disprove the claim. It also seems to conflict with Zaleski's (1987: 190) argument that NDEs are largely culture-specific products of the 'religious imagination'.

On the other hand, the argument does not explicitly rule out the possibility that the *reason* for conceptualizing dying in these terms was the interpretation of shamanistic/near-death experience. By not specifying the origins of the 'conceptually logical' beliefs, the argument does not necessarily exclude an experiential origin for them. It would, after all, be 'logical' to base afterlife conceptions on experiences of being nearly dead. There is thus no difficulty with conceptual logic theory if it can accommodate such experiences.

Related arguments from the fields of the cognitive science of religion and neurotheology state that because of universal 'mind-brain' functions, the mechanisms of cognition are also universal, and therefore so are ways of understanding existential questions; for example, those regarding the afterlife. A combination of 'genetic and cognitive constraints' (i.e. universal elements) and 'background conditions' (i.e. culture-specific elements) determine the nature and character of beliefs within a society (Boyer 1994: 12–21). A similar notion was first put forth by Bastian, the nineteenth-century anthropologist (Bartel 1982: 33), and is consistent with Lévi-Strauss' thought on universal cognitive structures (Doniger 1998: 143). The limitations of these types of theories have been noted in [Chapter 3](#) as concerns the NDE, and the problems with conceptual logic theories also apply.

D'Aquili and Newberg (1999: 14) are two neurotheologians who do, in passing, acknowledge the possibility that 'mystical experience' influenced belief. This is potentially compelling as it may allow (a) for an experiential element; (b) for the components of the experiential element to be one and the same as the universal cognitive elements; and (c) for the experience to be affected by a cultural/individual overlay. Their main argument, however, is that the NDE is the result of 'the neural activation

of certain archetypes' which are products of 'specific neural pathways' (ibid. 122). As the authors admit (ibid. 131), postulating a neurophysiological basis for Jungian archetypes is highly speculative; though the attempt to graft their mechanistic version of Jungian theory onto cognitive science is also convoluted and vague. In addition, Paper (2004: 66) criticizes their work for displaying an evolutionist Christian bias to such a degree that they characterize only Western monotheisms as being associated with total functioning of the brain. Apparently intending to strengthen parallels with texts such as the *Bardo Thödol*, they also claim that both negative and positive archetypes are generally 'activated' in a single NDE (D'Aquili and Newberg 1999: 134), but that modern westerners are not prepared to acknowledge 'such grisly horrors' (ibid. 139). This is not only misleading regarding the nature of the NDE (as is their claim that the NDEr's thoughts move in 'slow motion' [ibid. 142] when in fact it is the opposite), it also falsely generalizes the experience as a Western phenomenon. Finally, D'Aquili and Newberg neglect the possible evidential significance of the OBE; and their theory revolves entirely around brain function *during* the NDE, though the experience is alleged to occur when no brain function is possible.

According to Martin (2000a: 55), there is as yet no naturalistic or cognitive science-based 'complete theory for a competent comparing of religions that has been fully "tested" against the cross-cultural and historical data'. This is further borne out by Winkelman's (2004: 205) neurotheological study of shamanism. He argued that

The universality of the death-and-rebirth experience reflects neurognostic processes of self-transformation, a natural response to overwhelming stress and intrapsychic conflicts. This breakdown of ego structures is experienced in "autosymbolic images" of bodily destruction, which activate innate drives toward psychological integration.

The first difficulty here is Winkelman's a priori reasoning, for universality alone does not automatically indicate a biological or any other kind of theory.³ Indeed, universality is also the foundation of arguments supportive of constructivist and metaphysical theories. Second, most humans experience 'overwhelming stress and intrapsychic conflicts' at

some point in their lives, and it is thus unclear why such ‘self-transformation’ would be limited only to exceptional individuals (NDErs, shamans). Nor is the theory applicable to the unsought NDE: even if we accept a reductionist model, ‘psychological integration’ is functionally useless to a dying brain. Winkelman (ibid. 200f.) also argues that OBE/soul journeys are ‘symbolic’ of transcendence of the self, and of the capacity for self-referentiality (seeing yourself as others see you).⁴ Whether subjectively or objectively, surely such an experience is *effectively* a transcendence of the self, and the ultimate realization of self-referentiality. It is unintelligible to suggest that an experience is symbolic of what it actually is:⁵ is laughing an experience of laughter, or is it merely symbolic of laughter? The purpose of such a scenario is also obscure, notwithstanding Winkelman’s (ibid. 213) argument that ‘Evolution of the human brain has produced a modular structure with specialized subsystems, which result in a fragmentation of consciousness. Shamanic traditions have produced an integration of consciousness through community-bonding rituals’. It is unclear (a) how an exceptional individual undergoing experiences which are symbolic of themselves would resolve a ‘fragmentation of consciousness’ problem built into the human brain; and (b) how this would have any profound effect on the fragmented consciousnesses of community members who do not undergo the experience. The theory implies that shamans are the only ‘psychologically integrated’ members of the community. Finally, the claim that shamanism is part of the same neurobiological system responsible for dreaming (ibid. 202–3) does nothing to explain the allegedly cross-cultural consistency of shamanic experiences, and only raises the question of why there is no ‘typical’ dream as there is (allegedly) a typical shamanic journey.

Trigger (2003: 685–6) argued that some cross-cultural similarities ‘reflect little-understood tendencies of the human mind to produce particular types of analogies’. The explanations for these ‘tendencies’ he believed would be found in the fields of biology, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology, for ‘only a materialist evolutionary approach is sustainable’. In other words, he assumed that a particular type of unproven theory is correct. Aside from the fact that *argumentum ad ignorantiam* is methodologically untenable (as argued in [Chapter 1](#)), while Trigger briefly considered the possibility of Siberia-China-Mesoamerica diffusion of

shamanism, he did not consider the possibility that shamanic experience (let alone NDE) might be universal and could therefore explain some cross-cultural similarities without recourse to highly speculative diffusionist constructs. A consideration of such experiences by no means precludes a 'materialist approach', for regardless of their meaning or veridicality they unquestionably do occur. As with other theories discussed above, cognitive and neurotheological theories do not necessarily exclude shamanic/near-death experiences as an explanation for recurring afterlife motifs. Instead they either ignore them, or characterize them as neurophysiological phenomena: universal chemical/cognitive activities of the dying brain influencing the culture/individual-specific creative powers of the subconscious mind, resulting in a religious text displaying similarities to reports of the activity of the dying brain. The problems with shamanic experiential theory should be remembered here, however, particularly that the mind would be universally responding with similar concepts and imagery to *different* consciousness-altering practices; and indeed that the universality of such experiences has not been established.

While I fully agree with Trigger (ibid. 687) that a 'broader spectrum of factors must be taken into account to explain similarities and differences among early civilizations than is fashionable in most current theorizing', I also contend that it must be broader than Trigger has allowed. Some afterlife ideas clearly are due to cognitive factors or conceptual logic. The general human tendency to anthropomorphize relates to descriptions of afterlife beings and realms mirroring familiar earthly scenes, for example. It is puzzling, however, that attempts to explain the cross-cultural similarities in afterlife conceptions rarely mention NDEs or shamanism as contributing universal factors, instead relying wholly on single prime-mover anthropological, sociological, or neurotheological assumptions – none of which are adequate when taken on their own.

Metaphysical

While the issue of whether life after death actually occurs is not our main concern here, it does have some bearing on evaluating the abilities of the various theories to explain the results of the comparison. Numerous

researchers who have noted the similarities between NDEs and afterlife conceptions cross-culturally have concluded that they are indicative of a genuine transcendental afterlife reality (e.g. Hick 1976, 1989; Grosso 1983: 34–5; Platthy 1992: 60ff., 105; Grof 1994: 6–7; Ma'súmián 1995: [chapter 10](#); Badham 2003).⁶

Although William James (1902: 515–6) wrote that mystical experiences are '*primarily*' the work of the subconscious, manifest as apparently external and objective (ibid. 513), he instinctively felt that 'the further limits of our being' belong to a genuinely 'mystical' or 'supernatural' realm. Philosopher H. H. Price (1953) developed a similar idea by positing an 'intersubjective' afterlife, created by the individual's mind in conjunction with the collective minds of others in like-minded groups. The individual, retaining his/her own capacity for subjective observation and action, not only contributes to the creation of the shared elements of the group-afterlife, but also manifests individual, personal elements. The deceased effectively becomes a god-like creator being, integrating with what is essentially a limited, select collective consciousness in a communal 'dreaming' of their reality. The nature of the experience would thus be largely determined by the individual's psychological constitution, influenced by subconscious factors such as repressed fears (manifest as negative experiences), wish-fulfilment (manifest as positive experiences), and self-perception (manifest as either/both). The result is 'a plurality of self-created next worlds' (Paterson 1995: 205–8; cf. Grof and Grof 1980: 14; Hick 1976: 456–82).

A useful analogy can be made with lucid dreaming, wherein one is conscious and 'awake' during a dream. While the dream can be deliberately manipulated, it is also partly determined by the subconscious which creates and maintains the consistent 'background' environment. As with any dream, it is self-created; though the individual experiences his/her surroundings, occurrences, sensations, and indeed own body, as objective reality. Memory, personal identity, the sense of self, touch, sight, sound, and spatial orientation are all preserved in dreams. Emotions such as doubt, insight, fear, and joy interact with, and directly influence, the 'reality' of the dream. Likewise, in the afterlife state,

Imagining would replace the perceiving which is normally caused by stimulation of the sense organs. Imagining would perform the

function which perceiving performs now, namely, the function of providing us with objects which engage our thought and attention and about which we can have emotions and desires. (Lund 1985: 43)

NDE reports (and shamanic experiences; Harner 1990: 21) can read remarkably like lucid dreams. French actor Daniel Gélin, for example, described stirring up 'a cloud of fine, gleaming dust' during his NDE. The dust made him think of stardust, an association which 'transported' him to an outside locale beneath a preternaturally blue sky (Delacour 1973: 4, 7). Ballet dancer/director Janine Charrat reported a hellish NDE in a realm of flames, which she deliberately reduced to a soothing translucent rosiness when she became lucid. When she felt lonely and began looking around for company, she met her grandmother (ibid. 17). Both these accounts, however, were reported by the same author, and it is rare to find such explicit descriptions of control over the NDE environment.

Green (1995: 52–3) also notes parallels between lucid dreams and the NDE, recounting examples in which the dreamer described an OBE, a journey through darkness into light, and feelings of calm and peace. Lucid dreamers typically describe the experience as a 'spiritual' state of extreme clarity, with a sense of euphoria and freedom, transcendence of the self, and entering a state of expanded consciousness. The elation that accompanies the initial awareness of the paradox of dreaming while conscious recalls the paradox of the OBE and the corpse encounter: of realizing one is 'dead' yet still 'alive'. Lee (2004: 221) has noted similarities between the 'clear light' encountered in 'dream yoga' – the Tibetan Buddhist practice of lucid dreaming – and the NDE being of light. In the Tibetan practice, the individual has lucid dreams in order to direct the 'consciousness towards the clear light of death'. The light is said to be a manifestation of the mind, though is perceived as being external by the inexperienced lucid dreamer and NDErs unfamiliar with dream yoga. Merging with the light brings about the realization of non-duality and 'liberation from egocentric consciousness'. The light is thus a symbolic manifestation of 'enlightenment', which is both 'real' and subjective, for subjectivity is reality in a mind-dependent world. If we combine this with telepathic communication between dreamers, for which there is alleged evidence (e.g. Ullman et al. 1989), the parallel with Price is even stronger (cf. Hart 1959: 236; Ducasse 1961).

While a mind-dependent afterlife could hypothetically account for individual variations in NDE reports, it does not address the issue of shared elements beyond the confines of each group of souls. If ‘like-minded’ souls are drawn together, one might reasonably assume that afterlives would be based upon culture-specific belief, resulting in an Egyptian group, a Mesopotamian group, and so on. These discrete group-created realities thus do not explain the apparently *objective* elements, that is the (quasi-) universal *set* which also recurs in the texts.⁷ Nor do they account for the ‘*otherness*’ described for the being of light.

An argument that the cross-cultural/experiential similarities indicate an objective afterlife is not, however, incompatible with mind-dependent theory, if we consider the NDE (or journey in the texts) as the dying process and mind-dependence as the ultimate state.⁸ Bowker’s (1991: 209) point that the varying beliefs in the afterlife ‘cannot possibly all be true’ can thus be addressed if we focus on the main NDE elements which the beliefs all hold in common, *in combination* with post-NDE mind-dependence. Without the NDE core, the mind-dependent hypothesis is an extreme relativist-pluralist idea which circumvents any critical challenge, for any description of the afterlife would be equally ‘true’. Thus, there is indeed a human-devouring ‘earth cricket’ that looks like a ram (*Shj*), and ‘a centaur with the face of Jesus’ riding a chariot (Zaleski 1987: 135). The way to determine what is subjective and what is (effectively) objective is through *comparison*, which in this case has led to the identification of the recurring set of NDE elements.

Hick (1976: 275) has argued that group-soul mind-dependence need not be to the exclusion of all else: there may also be a divine element, or individuals might actually exist *within* and as *part of* ‘the divine consciousness’. In fact, if we dispense with the group souls altogether and adapt Price’s hypothesis to a post-NDE individual-*universal* co-creation, and view the NDE itself as objective/pre-mind-dependent (including OBE, reports of deceased relatives, and the being of light), we then arrive at a solution which can accommodate all elements and issues.

It is important to note here that although interpreted/experienced in individual/culture-specific ways, the NDE does not generally appear to be greatly influenced by expectation. NDEs of Christians are rarely overtly ‘Christian’, while those of atheists often convince the NDEr of a genuine spiritual reality (Becker 1993: 167). Mind-dependence is rarely reported,

and when it is (as in Delacour), it appears highly idiosyncratic, dreamlike, and delusional. Becker (1993: 178–9) suggests that we are so accustomed to experiencing and comprehending things visually and symbolically that we construct imagery around objectively real non-physical states and beings. We are limited by our own individual experience which provides us with orientation, ‘just like the imagery we project in our dreams’. Thus, as argued earlier, there are objective aspects to the NDE, which are given form by our own individual psychology and memory-processes.

To summarize, if we view the NDE as a genuine afterlife journey which culminates in a mind-dependent state, this could explain the similarities (the objective NDE, and perhaps effectively objective universally co-created elements) and differences (the subjective or culture/individual-specific elements) in our comparison. Mind-dependence could also account for the concept that the individual becomes divine (in the texts) or divine-like (in the NDE), with supernatural and creative powers; and for the multiple realms and experiences evident in each tradition. Feelings of oneness are consistent with the notion of becoming part of the unified consciousness (divine or otherwise). Badham (1990: 14–15) also finds the hypothesis to be compatible with the NDE, as does Gier (1985: 10–11) – particularly the life review and self-judgement elements.

The concept of a mind-dependent afterlife is found in the Vedas, where Svargaloka is ‘a projection of the mind’, an intermediate state to be transcended by achieving *moksha* (Panikkar 1977: 633). Yamaloka is reached via the pan-directional ‘chariot of the mind’ (*RV_A* X.135, 7). Ancestors become *creator*-gods, and the deceased ‘wanders as his nature wills’ (*RV* I.164.30). Svargaloka is also reached ‘by means of the mind’ in the *Up.*, which states: ‘what mind is, the moon is; that is Brahma ... that is utter freedom’ (*BU* III.1.6). When the moon asks the deceased ‘Who are you?’, the answer required for liberation is ‘I am you’. When Brahma asks the question, the correct reply is ‘... the self of every being. What you are, I am ..., all that is ... The Real’ (*KauU* I.2.2; I.5.6). The *atman* is the ‘inner controller, the immortal’, and ‘Whatever world a man ... ponders with his mind, and whatever he covets; that very world, those very desires, he wins’ (*MuU* 3.10). Dreaming and lucid dreaming are seen as being analogous to the afterlife state. Sleep is the ‘minister of Yama’ (*XVI*.5.1–6), the *atman* is ‘that person who, as one sleeps, roams about in dreams’ (*KauU* IV.15), and Pitaraloka is analogous to the dream-state (*KU* 4.3.13).

‘This world and the other’ meet in the world of dreams, which ‘serves as an entryway to the other world.... When earthly terrors appear in dreams, and one, as a god thinks “I alone am this world! I am all!” That is his highest world’. The dreaming self is ‘the maker’ who creates every aspect of the dream, and may go ‘wherever he wishes ... for he is a god’ (*BU* IV.3.9–14; 18). He ‘is the ultimate reality.... All worlds are contained in That, and no one goes beyond That’ (*KathU* 2.5.8; O’Flaherty 1988: 44). The goal of realizing that *atman* is *brahman* (or the sun in the *JB*) is essentially the transcendence of illusory separateness – a realization of universal oneness, analogous to the idea of lucidity within a co-creating ‘group-soul’.

Though not evident in the texts, the Lacandon Maya belief in an illusory afterlife which tests the readiness of the deceased to transcend it (Bierhorst 2002: 155) is relevant here. The Aztec notion that Venus/the deceased are fragments of the sun, and that reunification with the sun is the afterlife goal, is conceptually similar to the ‘group-soul’ idea. There is no explicit indication of a mind-dependent afterlife in Egypt (notwithstanding omniscience, and identifications of the deceased with creator-deities). Associations between dreams and the afterlife occur in Mesopotamia where the dream-god Sissig ‘lights up’ the netherworld for Bilgames (*DB*); and the dream-goddess Nanshe is the wife of underworld deity Niminur. In China, the conception of Shangdi as ‘an amalgam of the deceased of the ruling clan’ (Paper 2005: 64) recalls the conception of the group soul; and in *Hnz* ‘The mind ... penetrates into the depths of creation’.

In general, the ancient texts facilitate a mind-dependent/lucid dream interpretation when we consider the recurring importance placed upon the afterlife themes of (a) self-awareness and realization of the reality of the spiritual self; and (b) the deceased being continually associated with the divine (including creator-deities), while still retaining his/her discrete identity. Even where it involves becoming one with the divine or ‘ultimate reality’, ‘death may represent the end of all personal limits and boundaries, without necessarily being the end of conscious experience’ (Becker 1993: 185). This is reflected in NDE reports where individuals describe the experience as happening to *them*, a conscious *self*, despite feelings of transcendent oneness. Both concept and experience involve the

transformation (or realization) of the self as microcosmic part of the macrocosmic whole, rather than a total subsumption.

The concept of a mind-dependent afterlife can also be found in Zoroastrian, Jewish, Sikh, Christian (Badham 1995: 119, 121), Sufi, and Japanese Pure Land Buddhist traditions (Badham 1990: 18). In sixteenth-century Chinese Pure Land Buddhism the afterlife is mind-dependent, though ‘the fact that everyone at death seems to report essentially similar imagery demonstrates that the Pure Land is indeed intersubjective and substantial rather than hallucinatory or illusory’ (Becker 1984: 61). It ‘shares certain intersubjective features for all its “inhabitants”, has various regions suited to various types of consciousness, and responds in its minor events to the thoughts and wills of its “inhabitants” or experimenter/creators’ (ibid. 65–6). The tradition also addresses problems regarding conflicting wills and wishes of the co-creators. For example, if multiple individuals simultaneously desire to see the same person, that person cannot be forced to appear. Only objects, not people, are mind-dependent, and individuals retain consciousness and free-will. Deceased relatives can thus be seen as genuine, and not illusory.

As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), the *Bardo Thödol* states that the being of light will be perceived according to the individual’s cultural/religious background and beliefs. Other images are mind-dependent manifestations of personal hopes, fears, desires and the like (Evans-Wentz 1927: 94). In Winnebago Native American conceptions, the spirit must be free of fear and doubt when undergoing afterlife trials. This indicates that psychological/emotional factors contribute to determining the nature of the afterlife experience. The barriers and perils are ‘culturally conditioned visions of an ego which is still caught in the grip of social and cultural models of the imagination and has not yet learned to adapt to the new environment’; ‘our primordial consciousness confronted by our thoughts’ (Kalweit 1984: 64). Such experiences are ‘an attempt to make the surviving consciousness aware of the fact that it itself constitutes the world of the Beyond’ (ibid. 66–7).

Arguments from quantum physics have also been used to support such ideas. Quantum theory suggests that observation brings about actuality from infinite possibility (a process called ‘wave collapse’); that is, consciousness literally brings form and matter into existence (Goswami 2001: 13–14). This is achieved through a consensual process in which the

collective unconscious creates our shared universe (ibid. 30). ‘Quantum objects’ (e.g. photons) appear to be ‘interconnected’ for they can influence one another ‘even when separated by vast distances’ (a phenomenon known as ‘nonlocality’). This may suggest a monistic universe, in which the independent existence of ‘selves’ or individual consciousness is essentially meaningless. Thus, if there is a consensual belief in an afterlife, the collective unconscious will actualize an experience which corresponds to it. The similarities between cultures, and the correspondences to the core NDE elements, would be due to the fact that they are all universally co-created.

However, the role of the individual in relation to the universality is unclear, as are the reasons for the existence of variations of experience and conflicting conceptions. How individuals with different beliefs could collapse the necessary waves to form a consensual afterlife (particularly when many do not believe in an afterlife at all) is obscure. As with D’Aquili and Newberg’s theory discussed above, the hypothesis essentially merely proposes a mechanism for the functioning of a Jungian collective unconscious, and does not explain why/how allegedly consensual afterlife ideas/experiences arose in the first place. The idea of an objective NDE followed by a mind-dependent state (as outlined here) is irrelevant to a theory which states that *all* objectivity is merely an illusion created by universal subjectivity.

Poynton (2003: 143) has criticized Goswami for misapplying quantum theory involving ‘position and movement in physical space and time’ to human observers/consciousness. The application of the behaviour of protons to that of consciousness is unjustifiable; and extrapolating an interconnected realm of pure consciousness ‘that transcends space and time’ from the theory of wave collapse is unsupportable (ibid. 145). Goswami (2001: 77ff.) himself admits that evidence from parapsychology (particularly OBE) is problematic, for it implies dualism rather than the monism he requires for his theory. Finally, his arguments supporting Tibetan Buddhist ideas of conscious dying and recognizing the pure light make his statement that what remains of the ‘self’ ‘is devoid of any subject-object experience’ (ibid. 134; 204) entirely unintelligible.

Quantum theory thus does not provide a compelling explanation for the results of our comparison, or contribute significantly to the mind-dependence theory. The main drawback to the mind-dependence theory

itself is not conceptual, but rather that it is almost wholly speculative (notwithstanding alleged evidence from the NDE and other areas of parapsychology), and requires a leap of faith into abstract ideas unproven by current empirical science. Rock et al. (2006: 79–80) have, however, found correlates between shamanic imagery and emotional states, level of awareness, and ‘autobiographical memories’, *in combination with* some recurring landscape features which do not appear to be culturally conditioned. In any case, objections that a theory is unproven does not invalidate it for the present purpose, which is to evaluate the ability of competing models to explain the results of the comparison. Human understanding is not a prerequisite for the occurrence or existence of natural processes and phenomena (and if consciousness does in fact survive bodily death, this must be considered ‘natural’).

Chapter 12

Conclusions: Theoretical Eclecticism and a New Comparative Framework

Despite temporal and geographical separation, lack of significant cultural contact, and contextual differences between the genres of texts in which afterlife descriptions appear, a consistent set of thematic elements has been found to be similar across the traditions. The correspondence of this set to the core elements of cross-cultural historical and modern NDEs demonstrates a connection between the NDE and the conceptions as described in the ancient texts. This suggests that NDEs (and/or shamanic experiences) influenced afterlife conceptions cross-culturally;¹ and that such conceptions are thus, in part, culture/individual-specific symbolic interpretations of universal experiential phenomena. Because the NDE itself is culturally embedded, it not only contributes to afterlife conceptions, but also reflects them. In other words, the culture-specific beliefs and universal experiential phenomena are symbiotic, mutually influencing one another, and playing equally vital roles in the formation of afterlife conceptions. The afterlife experience as described in each civilization is thus a combination of culture/individual-specific conceptions (many of which are unique), combined with interpretations of objective experience which are also filtered through the culture and the individual author(s). While ‘all systems of knowledge are tradition-specific and embodied within particular cultural narratives’ (Flood 2000: 220), it does not follow that every component of any given system is entirely culturally *constructed* (as opposed to culturally *manifested* or expressed). The argument here is not for *unmediated* experience, but just the opposite.

The very existence of the cross-cultural similarities indicates that experience preceded conception. To argue the reverse does not explain how a set of thematically similar ideas could be independently invented,

or how it could influence/create spontaneous, unsought NDEs. The relationship between this precise, apparently universal set of afterlife-related conceptions and conceptually related experiences has not been accounted for by cognitive science or by constructivist arguments. Indeed, the theories discussed above do not alone adequately explain the results of the comparison, unless they incorporate such experiences as a factor. Not allowing for an experiential factor can only result in an incomplete theory that unjustifiably ignores directly relevant evidence.

Conversely, a satisfactory theory must also *incorporate* constructivist and cognitive approaches. Acknowledging an experiential element does not deny that other elements have functions or origins of a more prosaic nature. Although the experiential theory has the advantage of objectively distinguishing between the universal and the culture-specific through its identification of a core set of recurring elements, it does not in itself adequately address the differences or account for cross-cultural (but nonuniversal) recurrences of motifs outside that core. Nevertheless, while it can be illuminating to explore how social structure, economy, environment, psychology, and biology contribute to the formation and expression of certain elements of afterlife conceptions, it is another matter entirely to claim that any one of these is solely responsible for the origins of the beliefs overall. Single-factor reductionist theories cannot explain why the phenomenology of *experience* would so clearly correspond to that of *belief* in the present study. Even if the cross-cultural similarities in the ancient texts could be explained by some sort of grand unifying constructivist or cognitive theory, it could not be extended to explain the fact that the same elements are shared with the unsought, spontaneous NDE. The NDE itself is not dictated or determined by logic, will, deliberation, or individual action, and therefore it cannot intrinsically have a social/political agenda or goal; nor is it a biological necessity, making no contribution to the survival of the species. Similarly, beliefs such as *moksha*, divine omnipresence, and multiple transformations do not correspond to any particular economic, social, or political functions. They do not seek to explain observable phenomena, are not necessary for providing comfort or reassurance to the bereaved, benefiting the ruling elite, or ensuring moral behaviour, and are not required for a coherent afterlife doctrine. This means that the NDE and the texts not only share a phenomenological consistency, but also a common metaphysical meaning:

both are characterized by the technically ‘unnecessary’ ideas of spiritualization and the transcendence of the earthly self. Thus, the texts are imbued with the spiritual significance of the experiences; while the experiences are given authority by parallels in texts which are a source of religious/metaphysical meaning.

A combination of perspectives is thus required, for there are different *layers of meaning* to afterlife conceptions/NDEs: constructivist, cognitive, and experiential. This theoretical eclecticism helps us to avoid the academic or theological biases and selective use of evidence which can result when attempting to force data to fit a single, particular pre-determined theory. It instead allows us to combine components from a *range* of theoretical frameworks, adopting from each the elements that work and discarding those which do not. Doniger (1998: 150; O’Flaherty 1980: 5–6) has found this approach to be particularly suited to studying myth in societies with apparently contradictory beliefs, for pluralistic beliefs require a pluralistic theory. Theoretical eclecticism also avoids adopting a given theory’s particular ideology (ibid. 15), and therefore *contradicts neither our own cultural context, nor those of our sources*.

In fact, the theories reviewed here are not as discrete as they may appear. With the exception of diffusionist perspectives, all rely on types of universalism to explain the similarities, and culture-specificity to explain the differences. However, while the precise nature of the universal element varies between the social, psychological, neurophysiological, and metaphysical, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and a combination of universal factors is possible. For example, on the psychological level, the impetus to create such texts may lie in a desire to resolve existential feelings about death (e.g. fear of dying, coping with loss); and psychological factors clearly impact NDEs. On the neurophysiological level, the brain may assign ‘identities’ to each element of the experience, generating individual/culture-specific imagery, sensations, and perceptions (e.g. the human tendency to anthropomorphize, and to see images in abstract forms, such as clouds). This occurs both *during* the event, and *after* the event when it is being described. The brain thus does not *create* the experience, but makes sense of it – filters, interprets, and expresses it according to one’s cultural/personal background (see Lund 1985). The assessment of earthly conduct, the perceived ‘otherness’ of the being of light and deceased

relatives, and claims of evidentiality of the OBE and other aspects of NDEs are not adequately explained in 'dying-brain' terms, and may support the existence of a genuine metaphysical element. The mind-dependence theory incorporates all these universal elements; while the concept itself may have an experiential basis (e.g. in lucid dreaming) where it occurs cross-culturally.

Nor is there a single predominant culture-specific factor to account for cross-cultural differences, non-universal though highly recurrent motifs without parallels in the NDE, or culture-specific symbolizations of common mythemes. Again, a combination of factors is the most likely explanation. For example, psychological factors might involve realms of opulence and beauty as reflections of Freudian wish-fulfilment. Functionalist factors include elite manipulations of concepts of judgement, resulting in more detailed descriptions of opposing morally determined fates. Because it is conceptually logical to visualize the afterlife realm as a rarefied version of the only realm we know (or a reversal of it, in the case of negative realms), the afterlife reflects earthly social structures² (e.g. bureaucracy and hierarchies), local environments (e.g. earthly features such as rivers or mountains; a concern with nourishment in desert civilizations; idealized mirror-images of earth), celestial phenomena (the Milky Way conceptualized as an afterlife river), and the cycles of nature (e.g. death being seen as a continual process of rebirth and renewal, often symbolized by springs and rivers, and/or the movements of planets and stars). The specifics of expression would obviously differ because each civilization has different physical environments, social organization, value systems, languages, modes of expression and symbolic associations; and differences in what is considered to be conceptually logical. For example, the reason Egypt and India share a higher degree of similarities on the symbolic level may simply be that they had similar types of pantheistic polytheism, characterized by exceptionally inter-associated webs of concepts, deities, and metaphors. In addition to providing a well of symbols with which to express ideas, experiences, and emotions, a culture and its environment also present *limitations* on expression. Thus, there is no narrative genre for the recording of documentary NDEs in any of the civilizations but China; and no possibility of Nilotic animals appearing in the Aztec underworld. The human brain imposes its own cognitive constraints, limiting

conceptions to universal experience and culture-specific symbols based upon observation. Personal interpretation, emotion, and imagination play a role both in experience and in expression, and it is important to remember that experiencers and authors of texts are *individuals*.

To reiterate and summarize more generally, the recurring set of elements revealed in the present comparison suggests that the NDE or similar experience informed ancient afterlife conceptions. Cross-cultural elements which do not have a parallel in the NDE can be explained by constructivist, conceptual logic, and cognitive theories concerning similarities in environment, social structure, brain function, and so on. With the exception of the latter, these factors also contribute to the culture-specific differences, as do the personalities, histories, and psychologies of the individuals who had the experiences and/or composed the texts. Some degree of prehistoric diffusion cannot be entirely ruled out (cf. Collins and Fishbane 1995: ix), nor can limited diffusion between adjacent civilizations (particularly Egypt and Mesopotamia). Nevertheless, the ‘original’ belief may itself have been rooted in near-death/shamanic experience, for as Lévi-Strauss (1963: 248) noted, diffusion does not explain the *persistence* of a ‘shared’ myth: the transmitted elements would have to embody meanings relevant to each culture. The question of true universality remains unresolved, for no matter how exceptional, there are a very few small-scale societies without beliefs in an afterlife (Haley 1999: 2) – *perhaps because they have not had experiences such as NDEs*.³ Though we have surveyed only five civilizations here, it would be rare indeed to find an afterlife belief system that does not include the main thematic elements paralleled in the NDE.

Others have also argued for a theoretical eclecticism in the explanation of cross-culture similarities in myth and/or experience. While the models developed by Couliano (1991), Doniger (1998), Hunt (1977), and Zaleski (1987) are admirable, the ways in which they combined theories are ultimately unsatisfactory – particularly their over-reliance on the clearly problematic notions of intertextuality/diffusion, constructivisms, and conceptual logic/cognitive theories. Such over-reliance (as well as Hunt’s and Doniger’s neglecting to include relevant experience as a factor) results in incomplete logic and hence incomplete theory, and often an uneasy sense of equivocation or even avoidance of confronting the issues head-on.

Couliao (1991: 6–7) wisely acknowledged an experiential element, as well as the limitations of ‘prime-mover’ theories, though his combination of cognitive/conceptual logic approaches, diffusion, and shamanism is not without difficulties. He did not, for example, specify how afterlife conceptions can be both universal and originating in the mind (i.e. individual), except to state that his

... cognitive assumption ... is that a simple set of rules would generate similar results in the minds of human beings for a virtually infinite period of time. Such rules could be, for example, ‘There is another world; the other world is located in heaven; there is a body and soul; the body dies and the soul goes to the other world,’ and so on. (ibid. 9)

It is these ‘rules’ which Couliao saw as recurring most often crossculturally, and explained their genesis as having roots in shamanism (ibid. 7–8); though as discussed, the universality of shamanic journey phenomenology has not been established. He also suggested that the similarities between NDEs cross-culturally ‘can in part be explained by our mental tendency to cast every new experience in old expressive moulds’. This seems to imply that NDEs match preconceptions, which is not the case; and that it is a ‘new’ phenomenon, which it is not. His intertextuality or ‘cultural tradition’ argument ‘is not dependent on complete transmission of sets of ideas’, which means it cannot account for the existence of such sets in our comparison – particularly as they occur between apparently non-intertextualized civilizations. Bishop (1975: 112, 120) also argued for a theoretical eclecticism to explain the recurrence of underworld descent myths in Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, Japan, Scandinavia, Siberia, and small-scale societies in Polynesia and North America. He argued that they can be accounted for partly by dreams and shamanic underworld journeys which were later elaborated in the context of afterlife speculations, and partly by functionalist and structuralist factors. He also argued that there are too many cross-cultural differences for Jungian theory to be an adequate explanation; and that diffusionism was only likely for ‘a minority’ of descent myths. Though the issues with the shamanism interpretation should be remembered,⁴ Bishop’s model is essentially in accord with the conclusions here. McClenon (1994: 169)

also reached similar conclusions: that in addition to the NDE, 'social and structural equivalencies also contributed to the commonalities within Buddhist and Christian images of the afterlife'; that is, a combination of 'primary features' and 'cultural needs' 'shaped religious ideologies in a common direction' (ibid. 184).

Bowker (1991: 29) wrote that diversity of belief means that 'no single theory will be able to eliminate all others as being itself a sufficient and complete account'. He added that psychological interpretations such as guilt or fear of death, 'are not in competition with each other; they are complementary', and that even the actual existence of the divine cannot be ruled out. Paulson (1999: 17) incorporated a spiritual element in his model of the NDE, which also included cultural and physical factors. He argued that none of these factors *alone* can adequately explain every aspect of the NDE, which he describes as 'a multi-domain reality'.

Acknowledgement of an experiential element neither indicates nor precludes a naturalistic *or* metaphysical explanation for the experience, but merely provides a universal context from which conceptually related beliefs emerge. However, the metaphysical explanation of an objective NDE journey followed by a subjective afterlife state has the benefit of addressing all the issues at hand: that is, the differences and the similarities in all our times, places, and contexts, in descriptions of both the journeys and the destinations. This is precisely because it acknowledges the different layers of meaning: structural, mythemic, symbolic; and thereby does not by definition exclude other theoretical orientations. While acceptance of this type of theory requires a leap of faith, reductionist prime-mover theories (e.g. 'diffusion', 'fear of death', 'elite control', 'neurochemical activity', 'collective unconscious') also require acceptance of the unproven, as well as the inadequate, for such theories cannot comprehensively account for the results of the comparison. Whether one particular leap of faith is somehow more or less valid than another is a matter of individual perspective, and the culturally situated paradigm in which we choose to place our faith is a matter of personal choice. This is not to suggest that diffusion, for example, is less empirically plausible than an actual mind-dependent afterlife; but that explanatory force is of greater concern than empirical plausibility. As Patton and Ray (2000: 15) wrote, 'The scholar's first aim is intelligibility, and she must make up her own mind about the reality claims and moral

principles she can accept, and whether she has discovered shared religious truths’.

Nevertheless, the theoretically eclectic model outlined above need not include an actual mind-dependent afterlife, as long as it allows for the inclusion of near-death/shamanic experiences, whatever their nature. As Pringle-Pattison (1922: 1) wrote, ‘The universality of belief is no sufficient guarantee of its truth’. Ultimately, this study points to a type of single experiential ‘reality’, which may or may not indicate a single transcendental Reality.

To conclude, the phenomenological aspect of the methodology adopted here has allowed for the discovery of the fact that there are elements of afterlife conceptions which are cross-culturally consistent, and consistent with NDE descriptions, suggesting (quasi-)universalism of both belief and experience. The method has also allowed for the emergence of a parallel way of negotiating and understanding both the NDE and the texts as combinations of universal, cultural, and individual elements; and indeed both types of data facilitated (if not dictated) the approach. This dual methodological and conceptual compatibility itself further supports the arguments here, particularly considering that a theoretical eclecticism was found to be the most satisfactory way of understanding both types of data, separately and in comparison with each other. The fact that documented NDEs occur cross-culturally, historically and in the present day, in all types of societies, demonstrates that it is a universal human experience. The claim that the ancient texts in our five civilizations reflect this universal human experience is thus uncontroversial (if we do not insist that the NDE is veridical). There is little difference between this and a claim that (culture-specific) humour in ancient texts reflects the (universal) experience of being amused, though we may lack empirical proof.

This study did not begin with the assumption that the theories tested would be only partially adequate, but rather reached this conclusion by applying the theories to the data. A narrower theoretical framework would not have allowed the theory to emerge from the data, and thus would have resulted in an incomplete explanation. The interdisciplinary approach has allowed for a theoretically eclectic explanation of the results of the comparison. There is no logical or scientific reason to attempt an explanation limited to any single prime-mover theory, or to dismiss

relevant experience as a contributing factor – particularly when the comparison points most clearly and forcefully in these directions.

As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), comparative studies have often been criticized for advancing ‘unfalsifiable universalist claims’ (Doniger 1998: 137). However, a theory cannot be dismissed for its inability to be disproved: it is a logical absurdity to consider an unfalsifiable theory to be false on the grounds that it is unfalsifiable (just as accepting that an unfalsifiable theory is unprovable – or at least is so far unproven – does not demonstrate that it is true). While ‘unfalsifiable’ is normally used synonymously with ‘untestable’, in the present case the cross-cultural comparison itself has been the ‘test’ from which the theories and conclusions have emerged. Charges that comparative approaches to the study of religion are biased *because* they often lead to universalist theories (e.g. Martin 2000b) also seem to invert logic, and are at odds with the methodology adopted here. Instead, it is surely the case that at least some scholars who research the issue in any depth reach universalist conclusions through a non-apologetic, (relatively) unbiased analysis of data. Denying even the possibility of universalism is simply another type of bias, no more and no less inherently driven by personal agendas and preconceived notions than any theological exercise.

The phenomenological approach adopted here has also led to some incidental, though significant findings. One is the identification of the corpseencounter motif in afterlife mythologies cross-culturally. This is not attested in the Stith Thompson (1955–58) index of folkloric and mythological motifs, and has not, to my knowledge, been recognized elsewhere. Analysis of the motif in relation to the NDE has highlighted the sub-experience of encountering one’s own body as a distinct and important element of the OBE; and one which should be included separately in the catalogue of NDE elements. Given their frequent occurrence in non-Western NDEs, the elements of mistaken identity and meeting individuals unknown to the NDEr whose identities (and usually recent deaths) are later verified should also be more widely recognized. A re-assessment of assumptions surrounding afterlife conceptions in Mesopotamia has demonstrated various oft-repeated over-generalizations – most particularly that the afterlife was entirely negative, shadowy, and lacked the concept of judgement.

Finally, the study has demonstrated that comparison in general, and a consideration of cross-cultural similarities in particular, can be fruitful and methodologically sound. The delineation of a tripartite system of structure-mytheme-symbol, or *langue-grammair-parole* (as opposed to the dual systems normally used) as an organizational tool for the phenomenological study of myth has supplemented the approaches of earlier scholars, and could facilitate future comparative research; as could the demonstration that experiences such as the NDE and shamanism should be taken into account in enquiries into the origins of religious beliefs. Taken together, using a contextualized phenomenological *method* (stripped of its dubious theoretical baggage) to undertake a methodical and explicit examination of both differences and similarities, along with a reflexive postmodern awareness, an open-ended theoretical eclecticism, the tripartite organizational system, and an acknowledgement of an experiential element, we have a new comparative framework for the cross-cultural study of myth and religion.

Notes

Introduction

- ¹ This term is used to characterize low-population, hunter-gatherer and/or herding/limited horticultural village-based or nomadic societies.
- ² Consideration is limited to texts which refer to such realms and beings in an explicitly afterlife context.
- ³ A distinction is made here between ‘apotheosis’, signifying the individual being elevated to the highest state of being, whether as a god or god-like; and ‘divinization’ specifying that he/she actually becomes divine.

Chapter 1

- ¹ Emphasis mine.
- ² Egyptian and Mesopotamian. The Vedic and many of the Chinese texts are still in current use, and Mesoamerican beliefs survive in some small-scale communities, and/or in some syncretized expressions of Catholicism.
- ³ See C. H. Long (1963), *Alpha: The Myths of Creation*. Chico, CA, Scholar’s Press; and B. Sproul (1979) *Creation Myths*. San Francisco, Harper.
- ⁴ In a slightly different context, referring to ‘primitive art’ and diffusion.
- ⁵ Emphasis mine.

- ⁶ By ‘metaphysical’ Jensen does not mean ‘supernatural’ but rather something beyond the ‘direct perception’ one has of a physical object. His contention that universals are not empirical but are determined by the theory and methodology of the individual scholar (ibid. 252) seems to contradict his assertion quoted above.
- ⁷ Emphasis mine.
- ⁸ The term as used here indicates an explanation which involves ideas and concepts beyond observable physical reality, and currently unproven by empirical science.
- ⁹ For example, of the contributions to Patton and Ray (2001) only a few tacitly allow for the question of metaphysical interpretations to remain open (Huston Smith’s contribution is actively supportive of them).
- ¹⁰ This is not the place to discuss whether an openness to the possibility of metaphysical explanations means crossing the disciplinary threshold from Religious Studies to Theology; though the position taken here is that it most emphatically does not.
- ¹¹ ‘Ritual or practical’, ‘ethical or legal’, ‘organizational or social’, and ‘material or artistic’.
- ¹² My own Egyptological contextual training has benefited my reading of the Egyptian material.
- ¹³ The Vedas are an unfortunate exception. Most translations are outdated, others are incomplete, and some material remains untranslated. Nevertheless, I have only rarely had to resort to paraphrases or summaries in secondary sources.
- ¹⁴ Notwithstanding the fact that my background positions me at a starting point informed more by the contexts and contents of ancient Egyptian funerary texts than, say, ancient Chinese poetics.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Segal (2001: 358), ‘the identification of a common category for [comparative] phenomena ... spurs the application or the discovery of a common explanation ...’.
- ¹⁶ As explained in the next chapter.
- ¹⁷ For Smith (2000: 239), ‘the aim of ... comparison is ‘a redescription of the exempla (each in light of the other) and a rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been imagined.’

Chapter 2

- ¹ Writing is not generally considered a defining hallmark of ‘civilization’, and the other characterizations may occur without it (e.g. the Inca) (Trigger 1993: 7).
- ² Evidenced by names of Greek gods appearing on Mycenaean Linear B tablets, and by continuity of cult sites.
- ³ Alvarez (1978: 81) argued that the concept of ascent in *Pyr.* was borrowed from India. Apart from the chronological difficulties and lack of evidence, it is purely hypothetical to assume that the concept did not exist in Egypt before *Pyr.*
- ⁴ This is by no means to claim that shamanic-type experiences were demonstrably unfamiliar to Egypt or Mesopotamia, but rather that the scarcity of evidence for the practice in these civilizations means that they cannot be used to support a grand shamanic diffusion theory.
- ⁵ Notwithstanding Herodotus’s (*Histories* II.75) alleged eyewitness account of such animals in Arabia.
- ⁶ Controversial claims regarding earlier ‘art’ and ‘religion’ such as the so-called ‘Venus of Tan-Tan’ from Morocco, and the recent (as yet unpublished) alleged evidence of ritual in a Botswana ‘snake-cave’ may or may not push this time back by the significant 40,000 years.

Chapter 3

- ¹ As of 1997, 25,000 reports had been collected from around the world (Badham 1997: 10). Thousands may be found online, including at the International Association for Near-Death Studies http://www.iands.org/archives/experiencer_accounts/account_index.html; and The Near-Death Experience Research Foundation, which claims that 774 NDEs occur daily in the United States alone (www.nderf.org/number_nde_usa.htm, retrieved 5 September 2008).

- ² See Fox 2003, [chapter 4](#), for a summary of the competing arguments.
- ³ Current research is attempting to obtain verifiable OBE observations in controlled settings (Fenwick 2005: 5).
- ⁴ For an earlier, though little-known (and hardly scholarly) French book on NDEs, see Delacour (1973); and for an independent German study published the same year as Moody see Hampe (1975).
- ⁵ For example, modern Western (Fenwick and Fenwick 1995: 239; Fox 2003: 318), ancient and medieval Chinese (Campany 1990, 1995), Native American (Wade 2003). Choice of whether or not to return is common in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mormon NDEs (Lundahl 1982: 167ff.).
- ⁶ For example, Græco-Roman (Platthy 1992: 92), early Christian (Bremmer 2002: 95), and modern Thai (Murphy 2001).
- ⁷ For example, Medieval European (Zaleski 1987: 28, 31, 75ff.) and modern Indian (Osis and Haraldsson 1977: 152–3, 192; Pasricha 1992, 1993).
- ⁸ Cf. Couliano (1991: 7, 9).
- ⁹ An American follower of the Indian guru Sai Baba also reported this and other culturally Indian motifs (Kellehear 1996: 28), demonstrating both the fluidity of ‘culture’ and the adaptability of NDE imagery.
- ¹⁰ It is important to note that it is especially problematic to try to generalize about NDEs in small-scale societies, for only a few cases have been documented (Kellehear 1996: 35).
- ¹¹ Paralleled in the ancient Greek agricultural myth *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.
- ¹² For further cross-cultural NDEs see Yamamura 1998 (Japan); Bailey 2001 (Tibet); Gómez-Jeria 1993 (South America), Morse and Perry 1993 (Africa).
- ¹³ That is, as opposed to the ‘archaic’ religions of the present study.
- ¹⁴ This example may be Christian-influenced.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, Moss (1925: 2–3, 38) for Pacific Islanders; Hultkrantz (1967: 132, 134–5) for Native Americans; see Part II below for archaic religions.

- ¹⁶ Zaleski (1990: 208) later adopted an apparently opposite (and apologetic) stance, stating that the NDE allows one to ‘come into contact with sacred realities. To say that this experience is mediated by the religious imagination and is shaped by cultural forces is by no means to deny that it is an encounter with God’ (cf. Fox 2003: 89).
- ¹⁷ This is supported by Sartori’s (2005: 291) findings, though conflicts with those of Grey (1985: 73).

Chapter 4

- ¹ For example, archaic language and references to earlier burial practices (Allen 2005: 4).
- ² Popularly known as the *Book of the Dead*.
- ³ *Pyr.* text reference numbers follow Allen 2005, with letters referring to different versions of the texts as found in particular pyramids.
- ⁴ Funerary rituals depicted in Old Kingdom private tombs also attest to early non-royal afterlife beliefs (Allen 1988a: 48), as does funerary cult evidence as far back as the Pre-Dynastic (Trigger 2003: 537).
- ⁵ The Milky Way may alternatively have been considered islands in a great celestial ocean (Allen 1989: 7–8). Physicality, however, may have been secondary to a conception of astronomical bodies as ongoing processes of cosmic/divine action (S. Quirke, 2005, pers. comm. 4 November).
- ⁶ Cf. Davis (1977) for a more comprehensive treatment of ascent in *Pyr.*
- ⁷ There is no corresponding passage in the pyramid of the queen Neith.
- ⁸ This passage *does* occur in the pyramid of queen Neith (Nt253)!
- ⁹ The spell seems to conflate the ‘efflux’ with the actual decomposing corpse, for it would make little sense to attempt to resurrect only putrefied liquids.

Chapter 5

- ¹ For example, Tablet XII is a translation of *BEU*.
- ² Bilgames, Ningishzida, and Dumuzid evidently form an Underworld triad, and are also grouped together in a cultic lament to Urummairrabi (George 2003a: 128).
- ³ The practice is evidenced by excavations of the third millennium BCE royal cemetery at Urim (Ur).
- ⁴ This is at variance with George's (2003a: 494) emphatic statement to the contrary, which is puzzling considering the solar, heavenly, and mountain associations, and the numerous common elements in other Netherworld journey texts.
- ⁵ Also called *Kilgal*, meaning 'foundation' and 'burial mound' (Sladek 1974: 58).
- ⁶ Gilgamesh himself becomes a ferryman in a mid-second millennium incantation (George 2003a: 130).
- ⁷ Evers (1995: 92) notes the association between flies and corpses.
- ⁸ Contradicted by the statement that the afterlife in *BEU* 'cannot be too far removed from the theological conventions of the period' (Katz 2003: 213).
- ⁹ The afterlife contexts themselves counter speculations that the primary purpose of this infrastructure is to judge other gods, or earthly matters, or to settle internal Underworld disputes.
- ¹⁰ As an analogy, the main relevance of descent myths in their Greek Mystery Cult context was to ensure a positive afterlife for the initiate through an association with the death-and-rebirth god and the cycles of nature.
- ¹¹ Spronk (1986: 97) points out that the determinative can refer to various supernatural powers – though it would still represent a distinction between different types of post-transformation existence.

Chapter 6

- ¹ Though one is in preparation by Joel Brereton and Stephanie Jamison.
- ² De Mora (1986: 468) and Butzenberger (1996: 71) have both argued that it is the *physical* person that has such experiences, on the basis that there is no term for ‘soul’ in the *RV*. Bodewitz (1999a: 109), however, pointed out that a soul is presupposed because between death and cremation the animating force and consciousness have left the body and act independently of it. There is, furthermore, no evidence for a belief that cremated and/or buried remains would reassemble as an intact body for resurrection in the afterlife realm.
- ³ For example, *Mahabharata* 7.322.
- ⁴ For example, *Markandeya Purana* 11.22–32.
- ⁵ Cf. Witzel (1984) on Svargaloka as the Milky Way.
- ⁶ As in *Mahabharata* 1.3.146–75.
- ⁷ *Sic.* ‘Brahma’ the deity and ‘*brahman*’ the concept appear to be used interchangeably here. While Olivelle italicises and does not capitalise ‘*brahma*’, for the sake of clarity I have re-standardized capitalization conventions.
- ⁸ Despite his acknowledgement of a multiplicity of beliefs (*ibid.* 78).

Chapter 7

- ¹ X. Yao 2004, pers. comm. 16 November.
- ² The term may also refer to the collectivity of ancestor rulers living in heaven; the sky, its divinity, and altar; or ‘the destination of the ashes of cremated sacrificial victims’ (Eno 1990: 188).
- ³ X. Yao 2004, pers. comm. 16 November.
- ⁴ The *Hou Hanshu* (compiled fifth century CE) records that there were Buddhist teachings in China from as early as 2 BCE. Indigenous beliefs were highly syncretized with Buddhism by the mid-fourth century (Needham 1974: 111; Arbuckle 1997: 111).
- ⁵ For example, Kaltenmark (1979: 35), X. Yao (2004, pers. comm. 16 November), J. Paper (2005, pers. comm. 8 September); contra Yü

(1987: 383).

- ⁶ ‘Complimentary forces [which] permeate all aspects of the spiritual, natural, and animal worlds, accounting for growth and decay’ (Loewe 1979: 60).
- ⁷ This description is curiously attributed to Confucius (Watson 1963: 87).
- ⁸ Also relevant, though at this point repetitive, is ‘The King of Huainan Ballad’ (ibid. 73ff.).
- ⁹ This concept becomes clear in the *Taipingjing*, revealing its probable Buddhist influence.

Chapter 8

- ¹ The numbers in deities’ names are associated with calendrical glyphs.
- ² Cf. the green heavenly chord depicted on the Paris Codex (Love 1994: pl. XXX).
- ³ ‘An animal that eats the moon’, according to an early Maya-Spanish dictionary (Tedlock 1996: 275).
- ⁴ In *CBC*, the brains of the sky are made of copal, a resinous incense (ibid. 276).
- ⁵ The modern Maya see the sun and Venus as Xblanque and Hunahpu, respectively (Coe 1989: 180).
- ⁶ Tedlock (1996: 275) suggests that the sixth house in the descent of Hunahpu and Xblanque is a ‘secondary elaboration’ because it destroys the astronomical/calendrical significance. However, there is also an extra severed-head manifestation when Hunahpu is decapitated a second time.
- ⁷ Cf. *The Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin* §889, 1028–30 (Edmonson 1982).
- ⁸ Lahun Chan, associated with Venus, is depicted similarly in the Dresden Codex, c.600 years earlier (Roys 1933: 102, n.5).
- ⁹ Known to be afterlife beings from the Paris Codex (Love 1994: 82).

- ¹⁰ According to Aztec belief, humans are all periodically transformed into animals. This has occurred four times, and Quetzalcoatl's journey takes place at the beginning of the current cycle (the time of the Fifth Sun).
- ¹¹ CVA mentions a further six regions: 'the extreme outer limit of the underworld', 'passageway of water', 'the obsidian hills', 'the place where the banners fly', 'the place where people are heavily attacked by arrows', and 'the place where people's hearts are devoured' (López Austin 1988: 333).
- ¹² Maize dough filled with meat, chilli, etc.
- ¹³ Klein (2000: 54) suggests the snake may be Cihuacoatl's intestines – one name for which was *coatl*; and that the gender differences are due to conceptual changes over time involving associations with the Christian Lucifer.
- ¹⁴ Sullivan's very different rendering has no reference to transformation or to 'the fleshless', instead reading 'The place where all go' and 'the place shared by all' (*PM* 134).
- ¹⁵ Others, however, show overt Christian influence, and are not discussed here.

Chapter 9

- ¹ See below for sample references for each civilization.
- ² Fear of mistaken identity may also be relevant to interrogations (e.g. 'Who are you?'), though see below.
- ³ The text (CT 404) may, however, refer to the deceased knowing the names of the deities, not of the self.
- ⁴ The modern Uto-Aztecan Huichol Indians of Mexico, who have been markedly resistant to cultural change and conversion to Christianity, believe in a five-day long life review (López Austin 1997: 186).
- ⁵ Perhaps analogous to *bardos* in Tibetan Buddhism.
- ⁶ Emphasis mine.

- ⁷ Cf. Hornung (1994) and Zandee (1960) for Egypt; and Brown (1991) for India.
- ⁸ As observed by Professor Stephen Quirke (2004, pers. comm. 11 July).
- ⁹ Cf. Joseph Campbell's 'monomyth', and David E. Bynum's use of 'motif' (Doniger 1998: 90–1).
- ¹⁰ The use of 'symbol' with its attendant implications is, in any event, actually supported here, as will be seen.
- ¹¹ These are only representative examples, and in most cases the themes are recurrent within each civilization (further examples may be located by using the index). Exceptions are the corpse motif in India and the 'origin point' motif in Mesopotamia. It should also be noted that some categories are fluid – interrogation, for example, relates both to 'Conduct Evaluation/Life Review' and 'Barriers/Obstacles'.

Chapter 10

- ¹ Elsewhere, however, Doniger (1998: 139ff.) seems to argue for a combination of Jungian and diffusionist theories in her explanation for cross-cultural occurrences of similar myths, in suggesting 'a degree of human (if not psychic) unity ... and a degree of borrowing or "dependence"' (cf. p. 62f. on the mind as 'a worldwide web').
- ² That is, NDEs as well as *déjà vu*, sleep paralysis, ESP, OBE, and experiences of alleged contact with deceased persons in Japanese, Chinese, Caucasian-American, and African-American cases (McClenon 1994: 9).
- ³ However, they also make erroneous claims seemingly to create parallels where none exist; for example, that NDE tunnel experiences are 'agonizing' (ibid. 108), that threatening beings and frightening realms are typical of the NDE, and that the Egyptian deceased encountered a final barrier from which he/she had to return to the body (ibid. 112).

- ⁴ The case is similar with Harner (1990: xii, 4–5, *passim*).
- ⁵ In direct opposition to McClenon's (2005: 162) argument that NDEs and shamanism are generally regarded as being equivalent.
- ⁶ Various symbols in the *Epic* are also shared by the Kabbalah, for example, the 'tree of life' motif (*ibid.*).
- ⁷ Grof and Halifax (1977: 182) cite one NDEr who explicitly stated that the two experiences were 'extremely similar'.

Chapter 11

- ¹ Cf. Malinowski (1948: 51).
- ² See, for example, Hultkrantz (1957), and Moss (1925).
- ³ Cf. McClenon (2005: 171) who sees cross-cultural similarities as supportive of NDEs having 'a physiological basis'.
- ⁴ Cf. Zaleski (1995: 398–9) for a similar argument regarding the life review.
- ⁵ However, see below on dream yoga and intersubjective afterlife.
- ⁶ Others have argued for a common metaphysical basis of religions in general, based on cross-cultural similarities of concepts of the divine or ultimate reality (e.g. Huston Smith 1977; Wilfred Cantwell Smith 1981; Ward 1987; and Reat and Perry 1991).
- ⁷ The same issues arise with Price's suggestion that groups might be based around similar 'memories' or 'characters'; and Price (1953: 16) himself acknowledged the conceptual problems with the idea of like-mindedness.
- ⁸ Or perhaps an intermediate state prior to rebirth (whether spiritual or physical) as Hick (1976: 456ff.) has suggested.

Chapter 12

- ¹ This is not to imply that such phenomena were common or widespread in any given civilization, but simply that they were

known.

- ² It is hoped that a consideration of afterlife conceptions in small-scale societies will be returned to in further research. This would help shed light on how different types of social organizations might be reflected in such conceptions; and would contribute to the discussion on universality.
- ³ Cf. Badham (1997: 8–9) who argued similarly for changes in Jewish afterlife beliefs concurrent with religious experience.
- ⁴ It is perhaps also worth mentioning that Bishop was writing before Moody, and thus would not likely have had knowledge of the NDE.

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